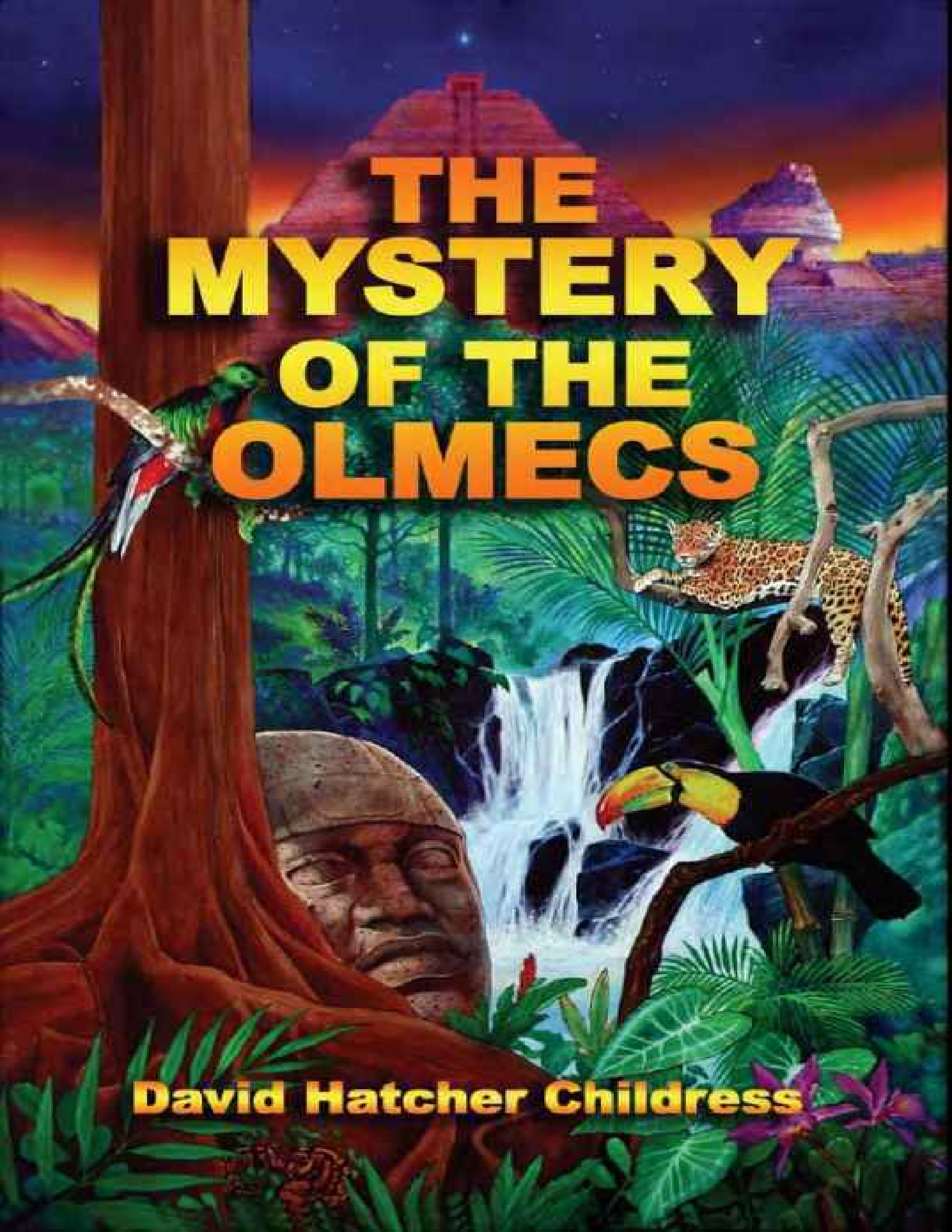
THE MYSTERY OF THE OLMECS
David Hatcher Childress

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OF THE OLMECS

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Olmec stela at Cerro la Piedra.

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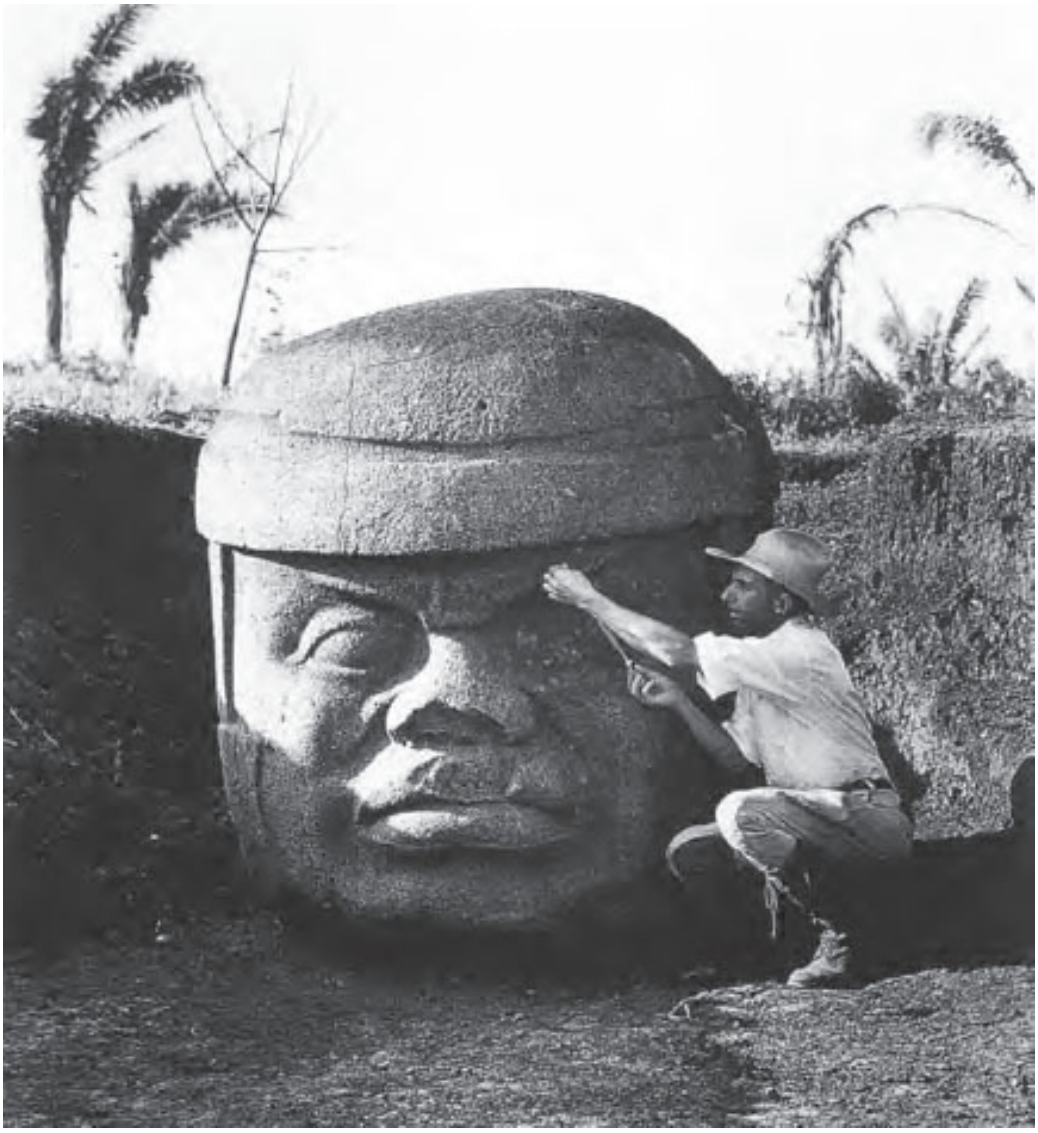

Mathew Stirling measuring the Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 1, 1939.

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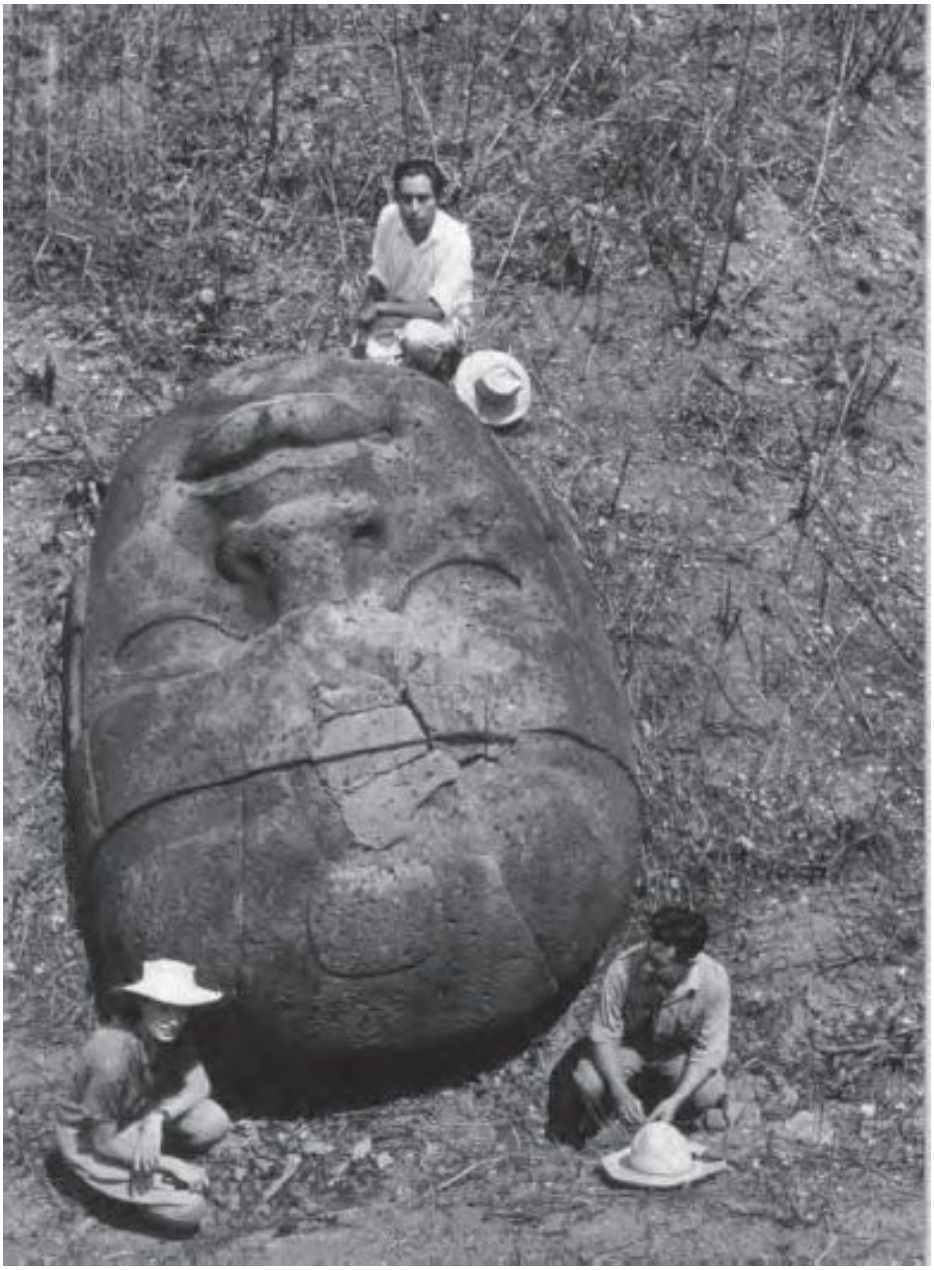

Excavations in 1945 at San Lorenzo, Veracruz State.

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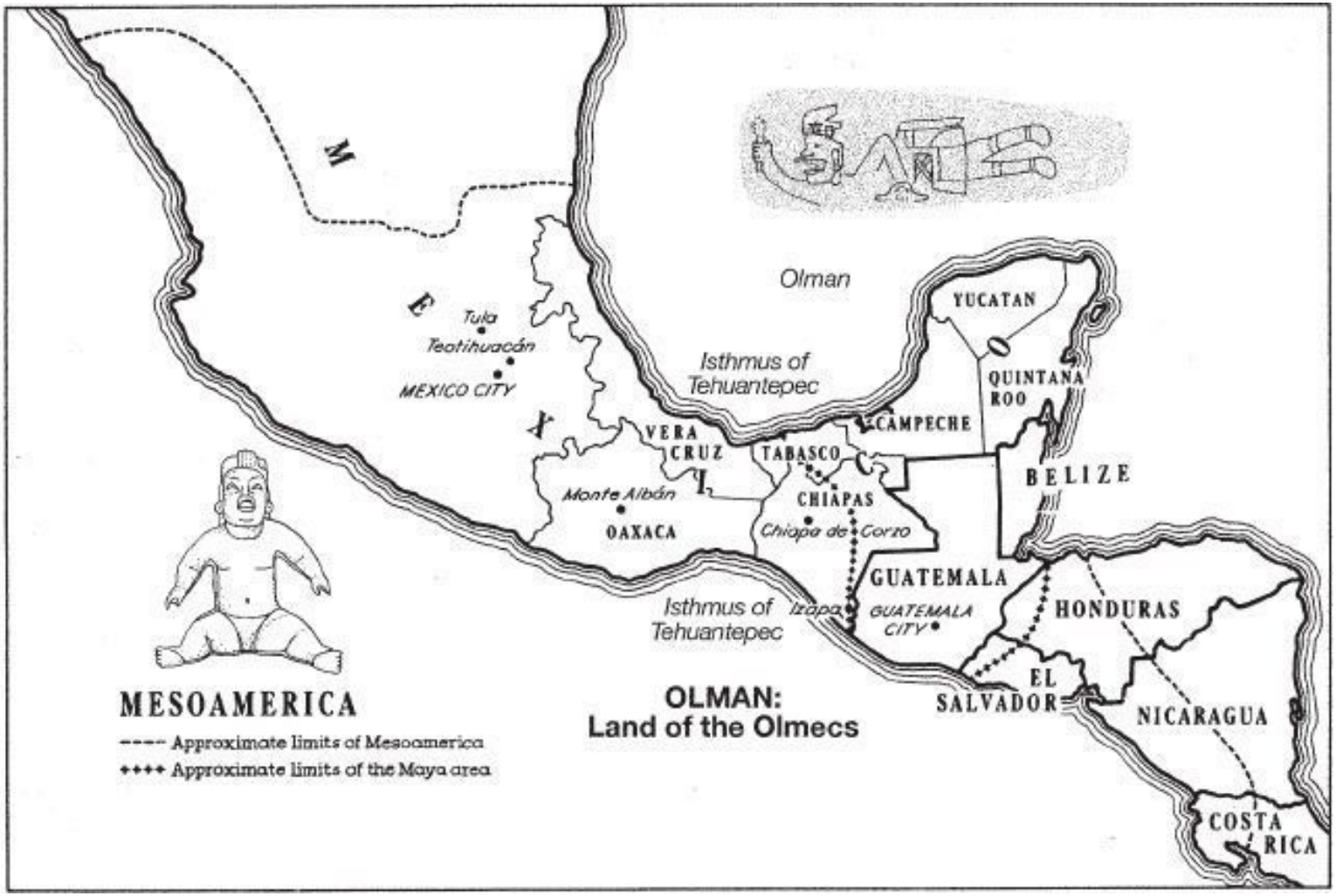

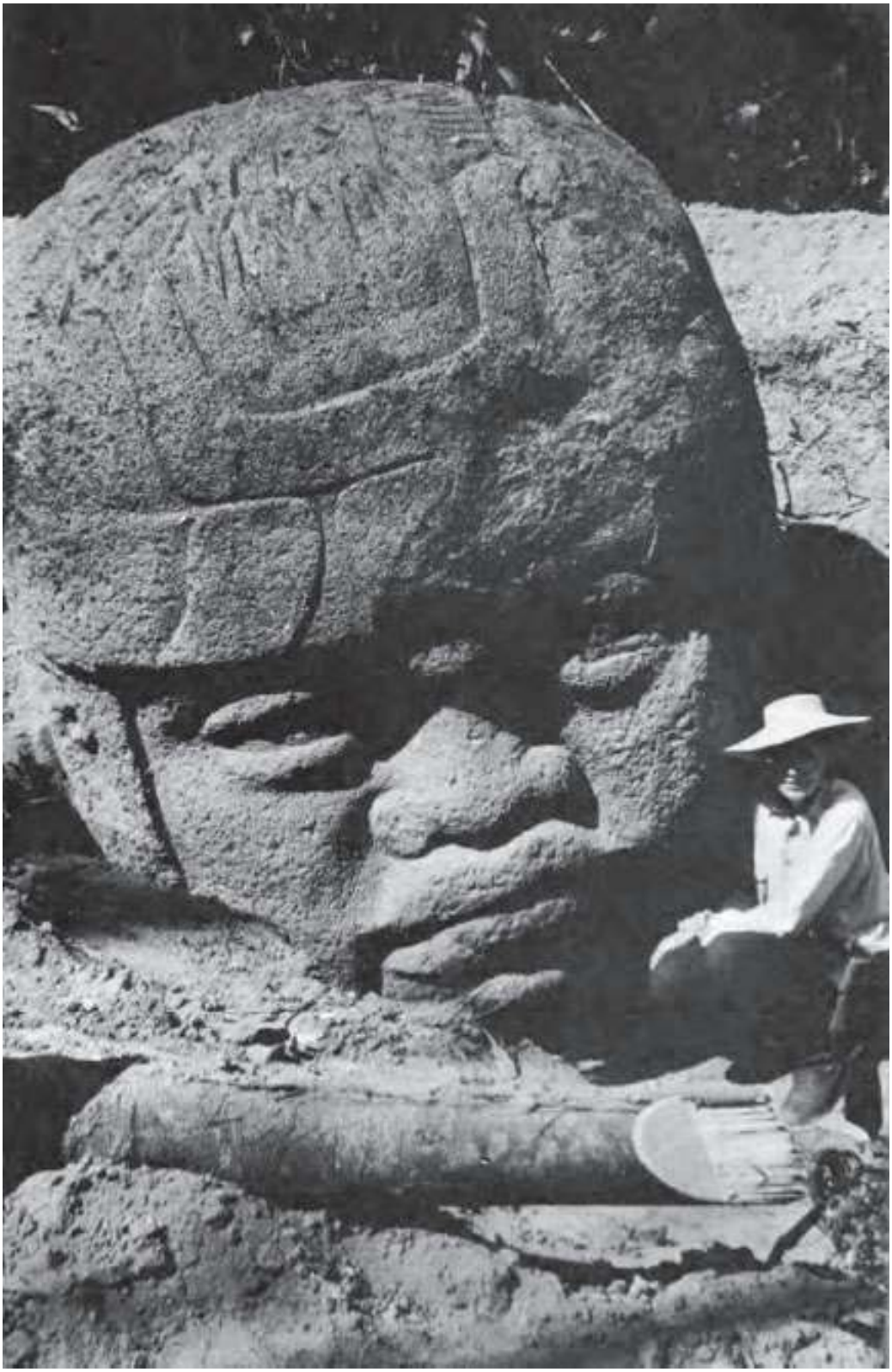

Colssal Head excavated at La Venta, circa 1946.

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1.
THE MYSTERY OF THE ORIGIN OF THE OLMECS

§§§

We can trace the progress of man in Mexico without noting any definite Old World influence during this period (1000-650 BC) except a strong Negroid substratum connected with the Magicians (High Priests).
—Frederick Peterson, *Ancient Mexico (1959)*

The Strange World of the Olmecs

The oldest, and probably greatest mystery of early Mexico, and North America, in general, is the problem of the Olmecs. Olmecs are now often referred to as Proto-Mayans by academic archeologists, or Olmans, meaning inhabitants of Olman, the "Olmec Land" as it is now being called. When one looks at the enigmatic cave drawings, the gigantic, perfectly carved heads, the trademark "frown," and the violent, militaristic look of the Olmecs, an emphatic question leaps to the forebrain: "Who are these weirdos?"

The strange world of the Olmecs is only now being pieced together. In their art, Olmecs are often dressed in leather helmets, have broad faces and thick lips (plus broad noses), have a mean-looking expression, and could easily be likened to a bunch of angry African rugby players, maybe from Nigeria or Tanzania. While mainstream archeologists assure us that Africans never colonized Mexico or Central America, the average man looks at these statues and heads and wonders how academia can make such a blatantly wrong assertion, one that is startlingly unscientific at its very core. Even though it is sanctioned by the hallowed halls of academia to tell the masses of tourists and students alike that these were not Africans, one must conclude that these academics are blind, insane or both!

What is fascinating about this enigmatic civilization to us modern viewers is how they represented themselves. In addition to these showing Negroid features, many artifacts depict individuals who have Oriental or European features. It is therefore very interesting to pay close attention to

how the figures are presented—how they dressed; the head gear they wore; the shape of their eyes, nose, ears and mouths; the way they held their hands; and the expressions on their faces. It is all wonderful art at its finest. The expressions and symbolism in the objects they hold or are associated with seem to indicate a high level of sophistication, and a shared iconography—What does it all mean? Who are these people? Were they isolated villagers or strangers from a faraway land?

The Discovery of the Olmecs

Until the 1930s it was largely held that the oldest civilization in the Americas was that of the Maya. The great quantity of Mayan monuments, steles, pottery, statues and other artifacts discovered throughout the Yucatan, Guatemala and the Gulf Coast of Mexico had convinced archeologists that the Maya were the mother civilization of Central America.

But some “Mayan artifacts” were different from the main bulk of the artifacts in subtle ways. One difference was that some carvings of large heads had faces with more African-looking features than many of the other Mayan works. Mayan paintings and sculpture can be quite varied but the African-looking features seemed distinctly un-Mayan. These African-looking heads often had a curious frown and often wore masks or appeared to be a half-jaguar-half-man beast. This recurring motif did not fit in with other Mayan finds.

In 1929, Marshall H. Saville, the Director of the Museum of the American Indian in New York, classified these works as being from an entirely new culture not of Mayan heritage. Somewhat inappropriately, he called this culture Olmec (a name first assigned to it in 1927), which means “rubber people” in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica (“Aztec”) people. Most of the early anomalous artifacts were found in the Tabbasco and Veracruz regions of southern Mexico, a swampy region exploited for natural gas, but in ancient times a source point for rubber. Ancient Mesoamericans, spanning from the Olmecs to Aztecs, extracted latex from *Castilla elastica*, a type of rubber tree in the area. The juice of a local vine *Ipomoea alba*, was then mixed with this latex to create rubber as early as 1600 BC (and possibly earlier). “Olmec” was the Aztec name for the people who lived in this area at the much later time of Aztec dominance.

Indeed, the Olmecs are now credited with creating the ball game that played such a significant role in all Mesoamerican civilizations, and the rubber balls that were used in the game. This game may be even older than the Olmecs, in fact. Ball courts and the Olmec-Mayan ball game were popular even as far north as Arizona and Utah and as far south as Costa Rica and Panama.

According to the famous Mexican archeologist Ignacio Bernal, Olmec-type art was first noticed as early as 1869 but, as noted above, the term "Olmec," or "Rubber People," was first used in 1927. Naturally, a number of prominent Mayan archeologists, including Eric Thompson who helped decipher the Mayan calendar, refused to believe that this new culture called the Olmecs could be earlier than the Mayas. Not until a special meeting in Mexico City in 1942 was the matter largely settled that the Olmecs predated the Mayas. The date for the beginning of the Olmec culture was to remain a matter of great debate, however.

Bernal sums up this curious archeological episode in his book *A History of Mexican Archaeology:*

> It seems barely credible today that, except for a few isolated mentions (Melgar, 1869, 1871), studies of small finds (Saville, 1902, 1929), or travels such as those of Blom and La Farge (1925) or Weyerstall (1937), what we now call the Olmec culture was totally unknown. It was in fact only in 1938 that the Smithsonian Institution and the National Geographic Society began work in the area, under the enthusiastic leadership of Matthew Stirling. In a few years they achieved the most sensational results by means of the exploration, albeit incomplete, of Tres Zapotes and La Venta. The extraordinary monoliths found in these cities and at other places in the area (to which Stirling was soon to add further equally marvelous finds from Cerro de las Mesas, a site which is not really Olmec though the finds to which I am referring *are)* caused a great stir in archaeological circles and threw up a whole series of problems of the highest importance for an understanding of the past.
>
> Perhaps the first of these problems was: to what date are we to assign this culture? Is it part of the horizon then still being called the Archaic? Is it a forerunner of the Maya and other cultures and thus the mother-culture of Mesoamerica as a whole? Or are we dealing with a late

local culture corresponding with the ‘historic’ Olmec of the written sources? Each of these obviously related questions elicited a different answer.

The somewhat skeptical position taken up by Eric Thompson, the greatest of the Mayanists (1941), and many others with regard to the antiquity of the Olmecs was based mainly on his refusal to accept the very early dates ascribed to the stone inscriptions, as on stela C at Tres Zapotes, and to the possibility that they might even antedate the Maya calendar. In effect, another of the basic changes in archaeological dating was the discovery that the Maya calendar is not strictly speaking Maya at all, but was in use before the first inscriptions at Uaxactun were set up. The Maya, therefore, did no more than elaborate upon it, refine it and make improvements upon it. The initial date inscribed on stela C was much disputed but there is now little doubt about it. Stirling’s theory, formulated even before the discovery of the other half of the stela, is the correct one. This proved not only that he had been justified in thinking of the date as very early—in fact it strikes us now as being if anything too recent— but that the whole Olmec culture is earlier than the Maya. This was anathema at the time because, as we have already seen, almost all the endeavors of the Carnegie and other institutions, North American in particular, had been directed towards Maya research, the consensus of opinion then being not only that the Maya culture was the oldest, but that all the other Mesoamerican cultures had stemmed from it.

At the celebrated meeting held under the aegis of the Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología in 1942 to discuss the Olmec problem, archaeologists headed by Caso, Covarrubias and Noguera, along with Stirling, all maintained that the Olmecs belonged within the Archaic horizon. Caso claimed that the Olmec ‘is beyond doubt the parent of such other cultures as the Maya, the Teotilitiacin and that of El Tajín (1942:46). Covarrubias held that ‘whereas other cultural complexes share “Olmec” traits, this style contains no vestiges or elements taken over from other cultures, unless it be from those known as Archaic’ (1943:48). Vaillant was one of the few North Americans to back up these theories and he did so because, in the course of his fine work on the Central Plateau with which we are already familiar, he had come across Archaic figurines displaying undoubted kinship with Olmec types. Eric

Thompson, on the other hand, thought that the Olmec was a late culture within what we have now come to call the Post-Classic

And yet the name Olmec, first used by Beyer (1927) to designate this particular art style, has prevailed until today, incorrect though it may be. It is a source of confusion because it is lifted from historical sources which apply the term Olmec to very much later peoples. In 1942 Jiménez Moreno cleared the matter up by showing that the name Olmec properly refers to the inhabitants of the natural rubber-growing areas, but even so we have to distinguish clearly between the relatively recent bearers of the name and the archaeological Olmecs, which is why he proposed that these be called the 'La Venta people' to make confusion less confounded. But the name given at baptism was not to be shaken off, and is the one still used today.

At the Mesa Redonda de Tuxtla in 1942 the Olmecs were given a provisional starting date around 300 BC. But somewhat later work at San Lorenzo, carried out with the aid of radiocarbon analysis—the use of which was spreading throughout the area—showed that 1200 BC was a more realistic date. This fitted in perfectly with what was being discovered all over Mesoamerica. It is a part of the general process that has already been discussed. Nineteenth-century scholars had often proposed fabulously early dates for the prehispanic peoples, and it produced in this century a vigorous counter-reaction which in its turn condensed them too drastically. But after 1950 this difficulty was to be overcome by the use of dating techniques that are not essentially archaeological.

Many problems concerning the Olmec culture still remain unresolved, but its existence and its importance are now beyond question. Work at a number of sites outside the limited areas I have already mentioned aided serious discussion of Mesoamerican archaeology as a whole. Research focused mainly on architecture, sculpture and pottery, without as a rule paying much attention to those sidelines that we might call ethnological. In spite of this the results were remarkable, and by 1950 there was an immense amount of material awaiting study.

The Olmecs had been discovered. However, this discovery created more questions than there were answers. The discovery of the Olmecs seemed to cast into doubt many of the old assumptions concerning the

prehistory of the Americas. Suddenly, here was a diverse-looking people who built monumental sculptures with amazing skill, were the actual "inventors" of the number and writing system used by the Maya, the ball game with its rubber balls and even knew about the wheel (as evidenced by their wheeled toys).

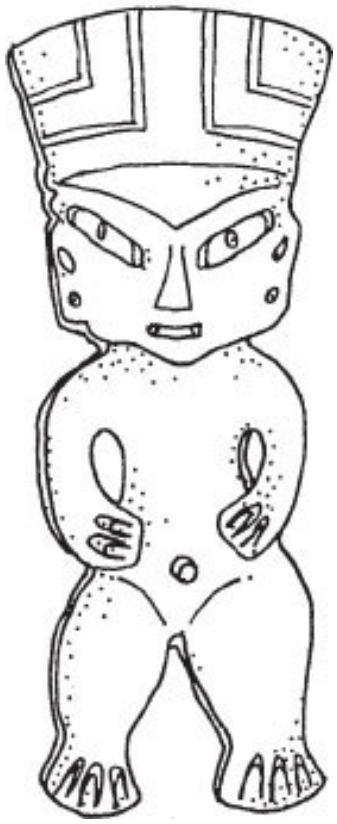
The greater enigma was upon the archeologists—who were the Olmecs?

Who Were the Olmecs?

Bernal continued to study the Olmecs and came out with the only significant study on this early Central American culture in his 1969 book *The Olmec World.3* In that book, Bernal discussed the curious finds attributed to the Olmecs all over southern Mexico and Central America, as far south as the site of Guanacaste in Nicaragua. However, he could not figure out the origin of these strange and distinctive people whose art featured bearded men, Negroid heads, and undecipherable hieroglyphs. Even such famous Mayan sites as Uaxactun and El Mirador were thought by Bernal to have been previously occupied by the Olmecs.

Still, orthodox archeologists such as the well-known British writer and archeologist Nigel Davies maintain that the Olmec could not be the result of any transatlantic or transpacific contact. Says Davies: "Discounting the more romantic notions of an Olmec sea borne migration, doubts persisted as to which part of Mexico was their place of origin, since they were later present in almost every region. The problem has been hotly debated; Miguel Covarrubias became convinced that Olmec civilization first flourished in the state of Guerrero, bordering on the Pacific Ocean, but won little support for this view. Others have insisted with equal force that they originally came from highland Mexico. However, a fairly broad consensus now maintains that their heartland or home territory lay in the rubber land of southern Veracruz and Tabasco."2

Davies is essentially saying that the Olmecs may have originated at Monte Alban in the Oaxaca highlands, Oxtotitlan or Juxtlahuaca near Acapulco on the Pacific or, most likely at Tres Zapotes and La Venta in the swamps along the Gulf of Mexico. All of these areas have known Olmec sites.



The idea that the these strange Negroid heads might be the result of early African exploration seems totally alien to the historians and archeologists who have taken over the archeology of the Americas. Despite depictions of various lords, kings, travelers, magicians and whatnot that look like Africans, Chinese, bearded Europeans, or some other strangers, most professors teaching at our major universities maintain that they are not evidence of ancient pre-Columbian explorers. They admit, though, that people might erroneously get this idea from a “superficial” view of these various statues and carvings.

So, even to mainstream historians, the origin of the Olmecs is a mystery. In the realm of alternative history, many theories exist on how Negroids arrived in Central America. One theory is that they are connected with Atlantis; as part of the warrior-class of that civilization they were tough and hard bitten. Or perhaps they were part of an Egyptian colony in Central America or from some unknown African empire. Others have suggested that they came across the Pacific from the lost continent of Mu, or as Shang Chinese mercenaries. Similarly, there is the curious association of “magicians” (or shamanic sorcerers using magic mushrooms and other

psychedelics) to many of the Olmec statues—magicians from Africa, China, or even Atlantis?

Are the Olmecs Transoceanic Colonizers?

It is not known what name the ancient Olmec used for themselves; some later Mesoamerican accounts seem to refer to the ancient Olmec as "Tamoanchan." The classic period for the Olmecs is generally considered to be from 1200 BC ending around 400 BC. Early, formative Olmec artifacts are said to go back to 1500 BC, and probably earlier.

No one knows where the Olmecs came from, but the two predominant theories are:

1. They were Native Americans, derived from the same Siberian stock as most other Native Americans, and just happened to accentuate the Negroid genetic material that was latent in their genes.

2. They were outsiders who immigrated to the Olman area via boat, most likely as sailors or passengers on transoceanic voyages that went on for probably hundreds of years.

At the center of the debate about the origin of the Olmecs is the classic struggle between isolationists (who think that ancient man was incapable of transoceanic voyages, and therefore, nearly every ancient culture developed on its own) and diffusionists (who think that ancient man could span the oceans, which explains similarities in widely disparate cultures). There are a few proponents of diffusionism at the traditional academic level. Ivan Van Sertima of Rutgers University in New Jersey actively promotes the diffusionist theory that ancient man crossed both the Atlantic and the Pacific in prolonged transoceanic contact. His books, *African Presence in Early America*[4] and *African Presence in Early Asia*,[5] are filled with articles and photos that show without a doubt that Negroes have lived, literally, all over the world, including the ancient Americas. While Van Sertima does not bring in such unorthodox theories as Atlantis or a lost continent in the Pacific, he is clearly of the belief that Negroes in ancient times developed many advanced civilizations and lived all over the globe.

Unfortunately, most of the writers in the academic field prefer to champion the isolationist theories to the virtual exclusion of the diffusionist.

In the recent scholarly book by Richard A. Diehl, *The Olmecs: America's First Civilization,*[19] Diehl has only one paragraph on the subject, saying:

> The origins of Olmec culture have intrigued scholars and lay people alike since Tres Zapotes Colossal Head I, a gigantic stone human head with vaguely Negroid features, was discovered in Veracruz 140 years ago. Since that time, Olmec culture and art have been attributed to seafaring Africans, Egyptians, Nubians, Phoenicians, Atlanteans, Japanese, Chinese, and other ancient wanderers. As often happens, the truth is infinitely more logical, if less romantic: the Olmecs were Native Americans who created a unique culture in southeastern Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Archeologists now trace Olmec origins back to pre-Olmec cultures in the region and there is no credible evidence for major intrusions from the outside. Futhermore, not a single *bona fide* artifact of Old World origin has ever appeared in an Olmec archaeological site, or for that matter anywhere else in Mesoamerica.

With this paragraph Diehl summarily dismisses all theories and evidence of transoceanic contact. We don't really know what a *bona fide* artifact would be, since Old World and New World articles were often identical, as we shall see. Also, we are given no further information on the pre-Olmec cultures that the Olmecs are presumably derived from.

But for the Olmecs to actually be Africans—not just look like them—they would almost certainly have come to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec via ship. But since such voyages are dismissed immediately and there will be no further discussion of it, the Olmecs simply have to be local boys who have always pretty much been there. At some time in remote prehistory, their early genetic group walked into this Olmec heartland area.

According to Diehl, the Olmecs would have been an isolated group within their region as well, with little contact with other tribes in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Says Diehl:

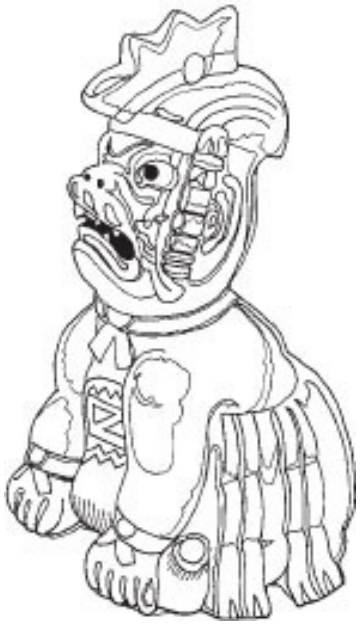
> We do not know what these people called themselves, or if they even had a term that encompassed all the inhabitants of Olman. There is no evidence that they formed a single unified ethnic group, and almost certainly no Olmec considered people living more than a few hours' walk away as members of his or her own group. Nevertheless, the numerous

independent local cultures were so similar to one another that modern scientists consider them a single generic culture.

This strong statement bears repeating: "…almost certainly no Olmec considered people living more than a few hours' walk away as members of his or her own group." If the Olmecs were isolated from neighbors only a few hours' walk away, they certainly wouldn't have had contact with people across an ocean, would they? As we progress with this book, we will examine just how accurate a statement this is—one that is largely accepted in many universities today, but would almost certainly seem to be wrong.

The Olmec settlements, according to Diehl, rose up independently in their corner of Mesoamerica without the influence of any other culture. They all suddenly began making monumental statues out of basalt (one of the hardest and most difficult stones to carve), and made large structures with sophisticated drainage systems. But they weren't really in contact with their early neighbors. The spread of Olmeclike artifacts was achieved only later when Olmec "styles" were used by other more widespread cultures.

Diehl was actually proved wrong on this account when it was announced in January 2007 that an Olmec-influenced city had been found near Cuernavaca, hundreds of miles from Olmecs' Gulf Coast territory, at Zazacatla. Announcements at that time stated that a "2,500-year-old city influenced by the Olmecs, often referred to as the mother culture of Mesoamerica, has been discovered hundreds of miles away from the Olmecs' Gulf coast territory, archaeologists said." *(National Geographic News*, January 26, 2007)



More on this in the last chapter of this book, but archaeologists have now concluded that Olmecs inhabited a very large area of southern Mexico, much greater than had ever been imagined! This discovery is not really surprising since the Olmec city of Chalcatzingo near Mexico City was excavated and written about in the 1970s.

So, the preponderance of the evidence shows that the Olmecs were very aware of the villages near to them, and aware of cities and peoples quite far from them. Were they aware of transoceanic civilizations as well?

Diehl's book, already outdated though published in 2004, is an interesting but fairly dry read. Not only does he refuse to discuss Negroid features and transoceanic contact in his book, but, except for one brief mention (below) there is no discussion of cranial deformation at all, which is one the more curious habits of the Olmecs and the Maya, and is found among many other cultures worldwide.

The Olmecs had many unusual similarities with the Maya and other transoceanic cultures, such as: the reverence for jade and exotic feathers; the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms and other psychedelic drugs; and the use of hieroglyphs on stone stelae as markers.

Says Diehl of the artifacts found at the Olmec burial at Tlatilco:

> One high-status woman was laid to rest with 15 pots, 20 clay figurines, 2 pieces of red-painted bright green jadite that may have

> formed part of a bracelet, a crystalline hematite plaque, a bone fragment with traces of alfresco paint, and miscellaneous stones. Another burial held the remains of a male whose skull had been deliberately modified in infancy and whose teeth were trimmed into geometric patterns as an adult. He may have been a shaman since all the objects placed with him were likely part of a shaman's power bundle. They included small *metates* for grinding hallucinogenic mushrooms, clay effigies of mushrooms, quartz, graphite, pitch, and other exotic materials that could have been used in curing rituals. A magnificent ceramic bottle placed in his grave depicted a contortionist or acrobat who rests on his stomach with his hands supporting his chin while his legs bend completely around so that his feet touch the top of his head. Could this masterpiece be an effigy of the actual occupant of the grave?

Indeed, Diehl almost gets excited about the Olmecs. Could they actually be psychedelic jaguar shamans who like to make monumental heads to keep themselves busy?

The Olmecs, by any standard, are a fantastic, amazing, confusing, psychedelic, and in some cases, just plain weird people. We do not know where they came from. We don't know why they were there. We don't know what their "mission" was. In short we know very little about them. All we really know is that they are old, and they are strange.

While it is easy to see them as Proto-Mayans and Citizens of Olman (however large that country might have been), we should also consider them as the fantastic Proto-Mesoamericans they may have been: psychedelic aliens who used lasers to cut colossal basalt heads; Atlantean refugees who made a last stand in Tabasco; or Shang-Chinese mercenaries taken from East Africa or Melanesia and specially trained to administer the Pacific (and later Atlantic) ports of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec; or perhaps a people originally from the Atlantic side all along, having come from Africa, possibly as a military force from Egypt or West Africa circa 1500 BC. There are many possibilities.

So, with an open mind, let us look into the mysteries of the Olmecs, their fantastic art, their sophisticated technology, their unusual number system, writing system and other customs. What we find may surprise us. We are likely to find that the Olmecs were geniuses, but many other cultures had surprisingly similar ideas.

Olman: The Land of the Olmecs

The Olmecs are said to have occupied “The Land of Olman.” This was a designation that the Aztecs used to describe the jungle areas of the nearby coast. The traditional definition of the Olmecs is that they were an ancient Pre-Columbian people living in the tropical lowlands of south-central Mexico, roughly in what are the modern-day states of Veracruz and Tabasco on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Their immediate cultural influence went much further though, as their artwork has been found as far away as El Salvador and Costa Rica.

The Olmec heartland is thought to be an area on the Gulf of Mexico coastal plain of southern Veracruz and Tabasco. This is because the area boasts the greatest concentration of Olmec monuments as well as the greatest number of Olmec sites. This area is thought to be the most northerly area of the Mayan realms, with such sites as Comacalco as the northernmost Mayan city along the Gulf Coast of the Ithmus of Tehuantepec.

This Olmec heartland area is about 125 miles long and 50 miles wide (200 by 80 km), with the Coatzalcoalcos River system running through the middle. The Olmec heartland is characterized by swampy lowlands punctuated by low hill ridges and volcanoes. The Tuxtla Mountains rise sharply in the north, along the Bay of Campeche. Here the Olmecs constructed permanent city-temple complexes at several locations: San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (usually just referred to as just San Lorenzo), Laguna de los Cerros, Tres Zapotes, La Mojarra and La Venta.

They also had great influence beyond the heartland: from Chalcatzingo, far to the west in the highlands of Mexico, to Izapa, on the Pacific coast near what is now Guatemala, Olmec goods have been found throughout Mesoamerica during this period, including south along the Pacific coast of El Salvador, and as Costa Rica.

The Olmec domain extended from the Tuxtlas mountains in the west to the lowlands of the Chontalpa in the east, a region with significant variations in geology and ecology. Over 170 Olmec monuments have been found within the area, and eighty percent of those occur at the three largest Olmec centers, La Venta in Tabasco State (38%), San Lorenzo in Veracruz State (30%), and Laguna de los Cerros, also in Veracruz State (12%).

Those three major Olmec centers are spaced from east to west across the domain so that each center could exploit, control, and provide a distinct set of natural resources valuable to the overall Olmec economy. La Venta, the eastern center, is near the rich estuaries of the coast, and could have provided cacao, rubber, and salt. San Lorenzo, at the center of the Olmec domain, controlled the vast flood plain area of Coatzacoalcos basin and riverline trade routes.

Laguna de los Cerros, adjacent to the Tuxtlas Mountains, is positioned near important sources of basalt, a stone needed to manufacture manos, metates, and monuments. Perhaps marriage alliances between Olmec centers helped maintain such an exchange network.

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec

The heartland of the Olmecs is also the narrowest land area in Mexico, an area extremely important if an ocean-to-ocean trade route were to be established. This narrow area of southern Mexico is known as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and it represents the shortest distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The name comes from the town of Santo Domingo Tehuantepec in the state of Oaxaca, which in turn conies from the Nahuatl *tecuani-tevec* (“jaguar hill”).

If you google “Ithmus of Tehuantepc” you will find that the isthmus includes:

…the part of Mexico lying between the 94th and 96th meridians of west longitude, or the southeastern parts of Veracruz and Oaxaca, including small areas of Chiapas and Tabasco. The isthmus is 200 km (125 miles) across at its narrowest point from gulf to gulf, or 192 km (120 miles) to the head of Laguna Superior on the Pacific coast. The Sierra Madre breaks down at this point into a broad, plateau-like ridge, whose elevation, at the highest point reached by the Tehuantepec railway (Chivela Pass), is 224 m (735 ft). The northern side of the isthmus is swampy and densely covered with jungle, which has been a greater obstacle to railway construction than the grades in crossing the sierra.

According to *Wikipedia*, the whole Tehuantepec region is:

…hot and malarial, except for the open elevations where the winds from the Pacific Ocean render the weather comparatively cool and healthy.

The annual rainfall on the Atlantic or northern slope is 3,960 mm (156 in) and the maximum temperature about 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) in the shade. The Pacific slope has a light rainfall and dryer climate.

The narrowness of the isthmus, and the gap in the Sierra Madre, allow the trade winds from the Gulf of Mexico to blow through to the Pacific; furthermore, the funneling effect of the mountains tends to increase the speed of these winds, often to gale force, particularly during winter following the passage of a strong cold front to the north. The Gulf of Tehuantepec, on the Pacific side of the isthmus, is therefore known to sailors as being especially prone to gales.

Since the days of Hernán Cortés, the Tehuantepec isthmus has been considered a favorable route, first for an interoceanic canal, and since the 19th century for an interoceanic railway. The Gadsden Purchase in 1853 of portions of northwestern Mexico also included a provision allowing the U.S. to transport mail and trade goods across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec via a plank road and railroad. The 1859 McLane-Ocampo Treaty, which Benito Juárez signed but was never ratified by the United States Congress, would have given the US extensive transit rights along the same route. This shows how important the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was, in modern times, as in ancient times.

Diffusionists (who advocate transoceanic contact between the Americas and Europe, Africa, Asia and Pacific Islands), maintain that important ports were used by ancient seafarers, and any sort of overland trade link between the Pacific and Atlantic ports would be highly desirable. Just as European engineers decided that they needed a canal across some narrow area of Central America 200 years ago, so did ancient civilizations many thousands of years ago. In fact, they apparently considered the same areas of Central America over the millennia: the narrow Panama isthmus with its many swamps and lakes; Nicaragua with its Rama River and huge lakes reaching nearly to the Pacific coast; and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Says Wikipedia:

> The Isthmus of Tehuantepec was a favorite for some time, because its proximity to the axis of international trade gives it some advantage over the Panama route; the Isthmus of Panama, however, is significantly narrower. When the great cost of a canal across the isthmus compelled

engineers and investors to give it up as impracticable, James B. Eads proposed to construct a quadruple track ship-railway, and the scheme received serious attention for some time. Then came projects for an ordinary railway, and several concessions were granted by the Mexican government for this purpose from 1857 to 1882. In the latter year the Mexican government resolved to undertake the enterprise on its own account, and entered into contracts with a prominent Mexican contractor for the work.

In 1888 work on the railway began and in 1893, and 60 km (37 mi) remained to be built. A railroad link from coast to coast was finally completed in 1894, when it was found that the terminal ports were deficient in facilities and the road too light for heavy traffic. The government then entered into a contract with the London firm of contractors of S. Pearson & Son, Ltd., who had constructed the drainage works of the valley of Mexico and the new port works of Veracruz, to rebuild the line and construct terminal ports at Coatzacoalcos on the Gulf coast, and at Salina Cruz on the Pacific side. The work was begun on 10 December 1899, and was finished to a point where its formal opening for traffic was possible in January 1907.

Thus Mexico linked its important Atlantic and Pacific ports through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, an area was coincidently the original heartland of the Olmecs. Coincidence?

Ignacio Bernal has this to say in his book, *The Olmec World:*

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec unites the Olmec area with the Chiapas depression and the Pacific watershed. It is a region which attracted the Olmecs, for no mountains cut across it and the climate was tropical. In the central depression, and generally speaking, in the entire state of Chiapas, Olmec remains or others related to it appear constantly, though —as in other regions of Central America—they do not constitute the basis or majority of archaeological finds. We are dealing with a culture related to the Olmec, though with its own peculiar features.

Black ceramics with white rims or spots appear quite frequently. At other sites such as San Agustin and on the Pacific coast of Chiapas the same ware has been found in scientific explorations. At Santa Cruz it is

clearly associated with other types belonging to the Olmec complex. At Mirador abundant Olmec figurines have been unearthed.

Even more obviously Olmec is the stela of Padre Piedra, which bears a representation of a standing personage; another man seems to be kneeling in front of him. It stands seven feet tall in its present state and originally was even larger. It can be of only local fabrication. This stela may have been associated with ceramics corresponding to Periods I and II of Chiapa de Corzo, which are Olmecoid. Another low relief on a rock near Batehaton is also markedly Olmec in style, and other Olmec objects are to found at numerous sites such as Simojovel and Ocozocuautla.

What Bernal is trying to establish here is that Olmecs were not just on the Atlantic coast but also on the Pacific coast of Chiapas. Olmecs are now known to have been on the Pacific coasts of Guatemala and El Salvador, too. Bernal goes on to say that the Pacific sites might be older than the Atlantic “heartland” sites and that some Mayan sites in the area, such as Izapa, were originally Olmec:

Some difficulties arise in correlating with precision the periods at Chiapa de Corzo with Olmec II, since Chiapa I would seem earlier. Late Chiapa II and early Chiapa III would largely correspond to Olmec II. Periods late III, IV, and V are to be connected with Olmec III, but discoveries do not correspond exactly to that pattern. The most important group of objects related to our discussion of the Olmecs consists of four admirably carved bones found in Tomb I. This tomb, however, belongs to the Chiapa VI period, thought to correspond to 100-1 BC, which is rather late. There is no doubt that the bones resemble the style of the Kaminaljuya stela and some elements at Monte Alban I, but their most evident relationship is with La Venta and with Izapa, another city which lies within the imperial Olmec world.

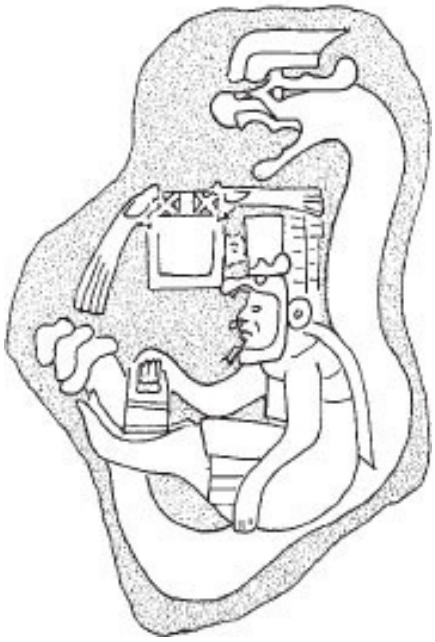
A most important discovery was the find, in 1961, of stela fragments at Chiapa de Corzo. Though shattered and incomplete, they suggest associations with Izapa and Tres Zapotes; I consider them to fall within Olmec III. One of them, Stela 2, is especially interesting because it bears an inscription in the Long Count. .. .Stela 2 from Chiapa de Corzo would be the oldest Mesoamerican inscription found so far, three years and nine months older than Stela C at Tres Zapotes. It would correspond to

December 7, 35 BC according to Correlation B, and to 294 BC according to Correlation A.

Scholars continue to argue about when the Olmec calendar (and Mayan, for that matter) began, with one starting date, Correlation A, beginning earlier and making Olmec dates, when they can be read, older. The calendar and Olmec dating will be discussed later.

Olmecs in Lower Central America

The Olmecs are also known to have occupied, or at least influenced, large areas of lower Central America, from Guatemala and El Salvador to Nicaragua, Costa Rica and probably beyond. One of the most famous statues in the Nacional Museum in San Jose, Costa Rica is an Olmec hunchback figure with an elongated cranium and oriental-type Olmec eyes. Costa Rica is also the site of the enigmatic, perfectly formed granite balls that defy explanation. Were they made by the Olmecs in a similar manner as the colossal heads?



However, “known” Olmec sites go only as far as El Salvador. Says Bernal, “The coast of Chiapas is extremely narrow; perhaps because of the lack of exploration in this very limited area, we know little about archaeology. On the other hand, where the coast widens, the land reveals the remains of an entire and highly important culture, though almost

completely unknown to us. The known sites extend from Tonalá in Chiapas as far as Chualchuapa in El Salvador. At times this coastal region had important relationships with the Guatemalan highlands, with the central depression of Chiapas, and with the Central Maya area."

Given that sites like Tonalá and Izapa were early Olmec sites that were later occupied by the Maya, other sites such as Monte Alban further north towards the Valley of Mexico can be assumed to have been first inhabited by the Olmec and then by later cultures.

Once the Olmecs had been established as the oldest culture in Mesoamerica in the 1940s, by default they became the founders of many of the ancient cities. Essentially, if it could be proven that Olmec iconography was being used at an archeological site, then it must have been the Olmecs who founded that city, since the Olmecs are the oldest culture. While there may well have been earlier cultures than the Olmecs in Mesoamerica, none have been specifically identified by archeologists (at least that I am aware of).

Since the oldest Maya sites such as Uaxactun in the Peten jungles north of Tikal are thought to have been first built by the Olmecs, it is possible that other older Mayan sites were also founded by the Olmecs. This list of Mayan sites founded by the Olmecs could include Copan, El Mirador, Piedras Negras and many others.

Olmecs in Central Mexico

Early archeologists believed that the Olmecs lived exclusively in the narrow area of lowlands in Veracruz and Tabasco, but excavations at farway Chalcatzingo during the 1960s and 70s showed that it was an Olmec site. The important Chalcatzingo archeological site is found at Km. 93 of the Cuernavaca-Cuautla highway, in the State of Morelos, just south of Mexico City.

Located at the base of Cerro de la Cantera, a twin-peaked outcropping in the southeastern part of Morelos, carvings found at the site depict mythical and religious themes associated with agriculture and fertility. The name "Chalcatzingo" is of Náhuatl origin and could mean "Place most prized by the Chalcas," "Venerated place of sacred water" or "Place of precious jades"—no one is quite sure what the translation would be.

The stone engravings and sculptures at this site became the focus of interest in 1934 during studies by archeologist Eulalia Guzmán. The area holds remnants of various cultures from 3000 BC to present day, which indicate the presence of outsiders to the region, including a strong Olmec influence thought to have reached its peak between 700 BC and 500 AD.

Archeologists theorized that Chalcatzingo was an outpost of the Olmec heartland established to facilitate trading. Olmec traders brought ceramics, agricultural goods and raw materials from other Olmec areas and Chalcatzingo became a trade center in the region.

The site includes low reliefs and sculptures such as “The King” and “The Flying Man,” a Mural of Fertility, a Procession, “The Puma” and “The Queen” as well as structures such as the “Tlahuica Altar,” the “Olmec Altar” and a Ball Court. Much of the art and features of the site were published in David C. Grove’s 1984 book, *Chalcatzingo: Excavations on the Olmec Frontier*.

It was announced in January 2007 that another Olmec-influenced city had been found at Zazacatla, in the vicinity of Chalcatzingo and Cuernavaca. Did the Olmecs have an extended influence in northern Mexico? Did they have some hand in building the mysterious pyramids at Teotihuacan? Teotihuacan was thought to be too far from the Olmec areas to have been built by them, but sites such as Chalcatzingo and Zazacatla are not so far away!

La Venta and the Olmec Heartland

Perhaps the Olmec capital was at La Venta, one of the greatest and most famous of the Olmec sites. The site is typically dated to have been active between 1200 BC and 400 BC, which places the major development of the city in the so-called Middle Formative Period. Located on an island in a coastal swamp overlooking the then-active Río Palma river, the city of La Venta would have controlled a region between the Mezcalapa and Coatzacoalcos rivers. Today, the Rio Palma is an inactive river, the area having reverted into a mass of swamps. One wonders if the Olmecs, as part of a gigantic earthworks project, had created a river through the swamp in which they created their “capital,” if that is what it was.

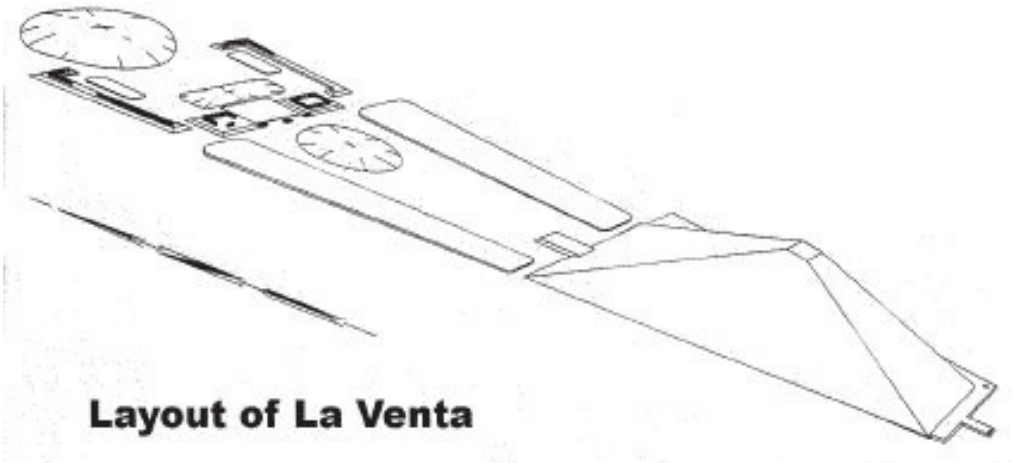
The site of La Venta itself is about 18 miles inland with the island consisting of slightly more than two square miles of dry land. The main part

of the site is a complex of clay constructions stretched out for 12 miles in a north-south direction, although the site is 8° West of true North. The entire southern end of the site is now covered by a petroleum refinery. Most of this section of the city has been largely demolished, making excavations difficult or impossible.

Many of the site's fabulous monuments are now on display in the archaeological museum and park in the city of Villahermosa, Tabasco, the oil capital of Mexico. La Venta and nearby San Lorenzo have been the source of many of the colossal heads that the Olmecs are so famous for. The important basalt quarries for the colossal stone heads and prismatic basalt logs are found in the Tuxtlas Mountains nearby.

Marking the southern end of La Venta's ceremonial precinct is an enormous pyramidal mound. Standing at the base of this pyramidal mound was Stela 25/26. This stela depicts a bundled zoomorphic creature with foliage at the top that is thought to represent a World Tree or axis mundi.

The northern end of Complex A is mainly an enclosed courtyard, with a massive underground serpentine deposit. This serpentine deposit is thought to represent the primordial waters of creation. Buried beneath the enclosed courtyard was Offering 4, a now famous funeral offering that is an arrangement of six jade celts (adzes) and 15 jade figures of Olmecs with elongated craniums and oriental-looking eyes. A single figure that faces the others is carved from granite. The entire group of figures stand together amongst the upright jade celts that are apparently representing in miniature the tall granite stelae that were commonly used by the Olmecs and Maya (as well as Egyptians, Hindus, and other cultures).



Layout of La Venta

Although the significance of this miniature funeral arrangement is not known, it eloquently demonstrates the conceptual relationship between the forms of the celt-adze and granite stelae, by making the jade celts into miniature stelae with the jade figurines standing around the celt-stelae, as if at an important meeting. This exquisite arrangement can now be seen at the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City and is one of the most famous displays in the Olmec section.

Two large adobe platforms guard the entrance to the enclosed courtyard. Beneath these platforms, enormous deposits of serpentine were placed in layers above alternating floors of colored sand. Although buried almost immediately after completion, these massive greenstone pavements are thought to have invested the ground with “cosmic power.” Moreover, the top layer of greenstone on each of these two flanking deposits was arranged into a quincunx pattern that marked the four corners of the universe and included a central bar, or axis mundi, marking the “center of the world.”

A third pavement, almost identical to the first two, was located between the two parallel mounds that frame the central courtyard or alley that ran from the main pyramid to the enclosed courtyard. Unlike the other two mosaic pavements, however, this pavement showed signs of abrasion, as if it had not immediately been buried.

As if to reinforce the theme of primordial waters that characterizes the enclosed courtyard at La Venta, a sandstone sarcophagus in the form of the “Olmec Dragon” floated above another massive deposit of greenstone at the center of the courtyard. Although a cache of jade jewelry was recovered from the interior of the hollowed-out sarcophagus, no skeletal material was found because of the acidic soils in the area. Nonetheless, the jewelry very likely once adorned the body of one of La Venta’s rulers.

Also found at La Venta is the famous Altar 4, which probably functioned as a throne. This massive piece of carved basalt, weighing tons, depicts a ruler wearing a bird headdress and seated within a niche. He holds onto a rope that stretches around to the sides of the altar. On the side of the altar that has not been defaced is a seated individual whose hands are bound by the rope, seemingly as a captive. Another suggestion is, perhaps, that it represents ancestral lineage. Above the seated ruler on the front of the altar is the enormous open maw of a feline creature. This gaping jaguar mouth

appears to be metaphorically related to the open portal from which the ruler is emerging.

While it is thought that La Venta was the “capital” or most important city of the Olmecs, this may not actually be the case. We know so little about the Olmecs that it is impossible to say for sure how important La Venta was, or whether there were not more important cities and ceremonial sites for the Olmecs.

For instance, some Olmec sites could be underwater in the Gulf of Mexico, or still buried in the swamps of Tabasco and Veracruz. Or, major Olmec sites might have been located in the interior of Mexico like Chalcatzingo or the recently discovered Zazacatla, nearby. These sites are are quite a distance from the so-called Olmec Heartland, and suggest that the Olmec lands—Olman—were quite extensive. As noted above, sites such as Monte Alban and Teotihuacan are thought by some archeologists to be associated with the Olmecs and it may be the case that these cities were originally important Olmec centers.

The more we find out about the Olmecs, the deeper the mystery surrounding them becomes. We find that the Olmecs seem to include nearly every racial type in the world. How is this possible? The Olmecs are credited with everything from inventing the wheel, the ballgame and hieroglyphic writing, and it is now known they controlled most of southern Mexico from shore to shore. From a diffusionist point of view, the Land of Olman may well have been the “center of the world” as the Ithmus of Tehuantepec would indeed have been the center of the world if there was a strong transoceanic trade across both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. If such a trade and movement of ships had existed, the Olmecs may well have been a cosmopolitical center where worldwide cultures intermingled.

Excavations in the 1940s at La Venta.

Mathew Stirling clearing debris from the Tres Zapotes Colossal Head 1, 1939.

The Tres Zapotes Colossal Head as first drawn in 1869.

Basalt column tomb discovered in the1940s at La Venta.

Olmec “Atlantean” altar from Potrero Nuevo, Veracruz. They are called “Atlanteans” because, like Atlas, they are holding up the sky.

Mathew Stirling (center) and colleagues at one of the colossal heads at San Lorenzo, 1946. Its eye had appeared in an eroded trail, leading to the discovery of this early Olmec city.

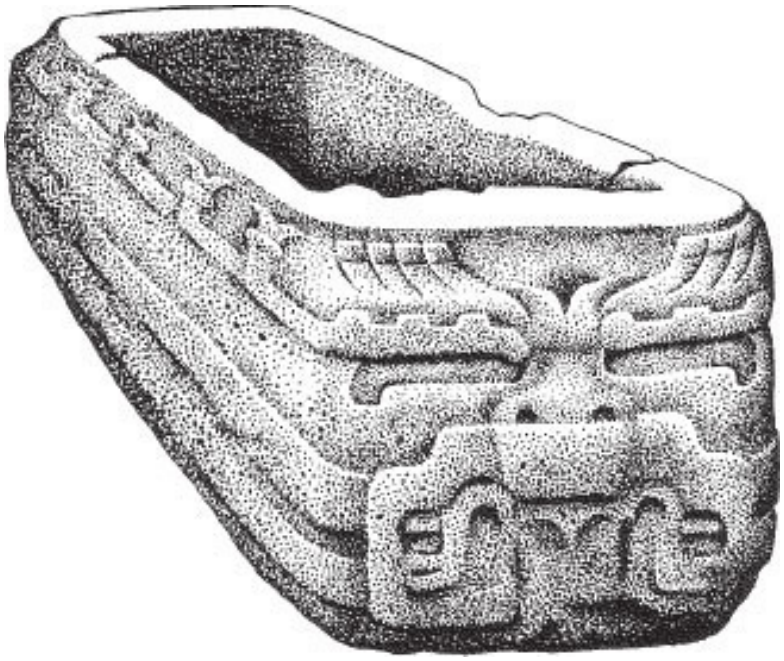
Pottery types found at La Venta.

Excavations in the 1940s at La Venta, basalt tomb in background.

Ignacio Bernal at Altar Number 4, La Venta, circa 1967.

Excavations in 1945 at San Lorenzo, Veracruz State.

Colossal head and visitor, La Venta, circa 1946.



Sarcophagus with were-jaguar face, La Venta.

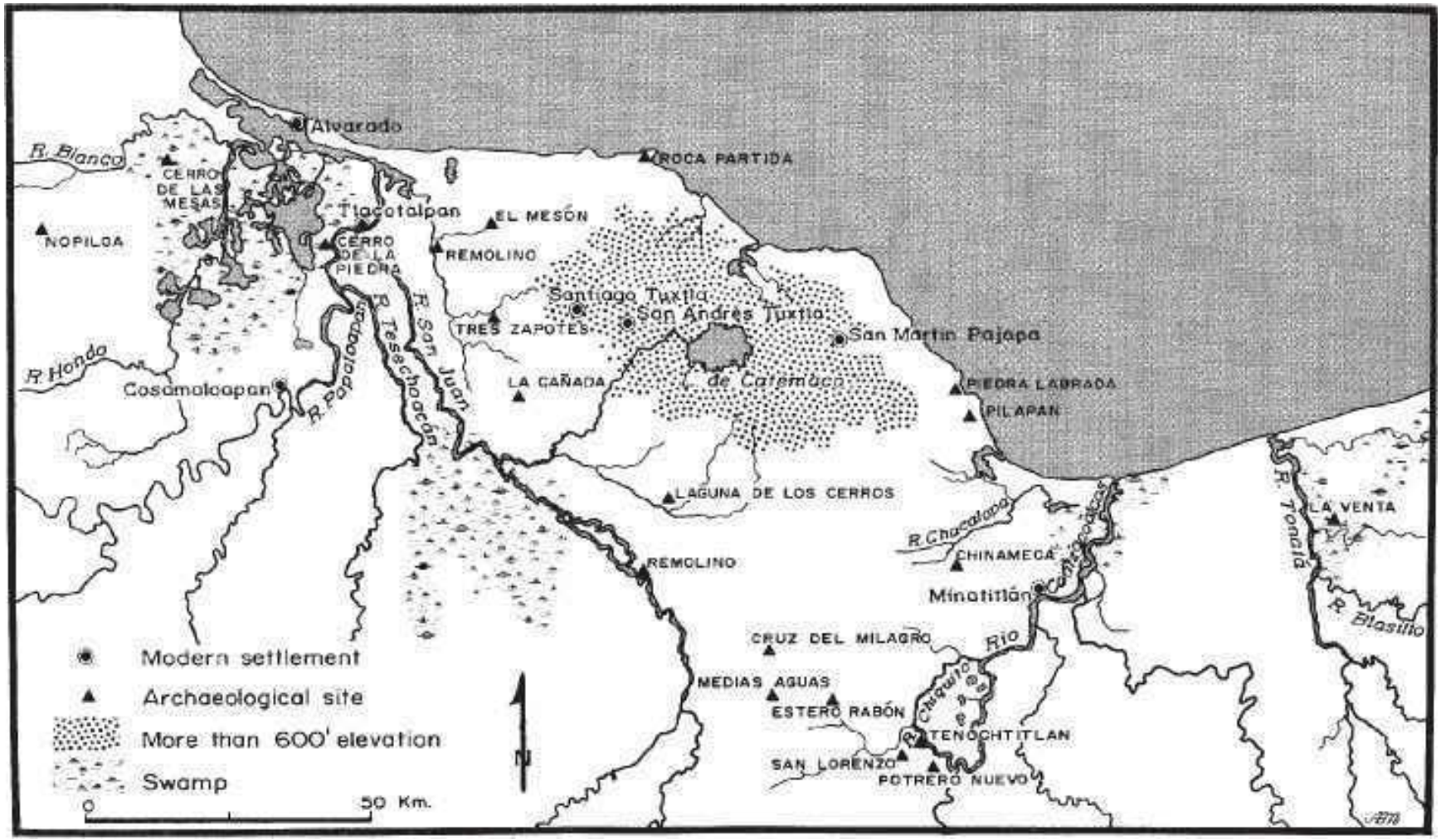
Olmec Jadeite votive axe now in the British Museum. It has the V-cleft forehead and typical “flame” eyebrows and Olmec frown, sometimes described as the feline frown of the were-jaguar.

Excavations in 1945 at San Lorenzo, Veracruz State.

Excavations of Olmec artifacts in Guatemala, at Monte Alto, near the Pacific.

Guatemalan archeologist Raphael Girard at Olmec excavations in El Salvador.

Top: Colossal head from Tres Zapotes. Bottom: Stele Number 2 from La Venta.


Alvarado
R. Blanco
CERRO DE LAS MESAS
NOPILOA
Tlacotalpan
CERRO DE LA PIEDRA
EL MESÓN
REMOLINO
ROCA PARTIDA
R. Papaloapan
R. Tesechoacan
R. San Juan
Santiago Tuxtla
San Andrés Tuxtla
TRES ZAPOTES
LA CAÑADA
San Martín Pajapa
de Catemaco
PIEDRA LABRADA
PILAPAN
R. Honda
Cosamaloapan
LAGUNA DE LOS CERROS
R. Chacalapa
CHINAMECA
Minatitlán
Coatzacoalcos
R. Tonalá
LA VENTA
R. Blasillo
REMOLINO
CRUZ DEL MILAGRO
Río Chiquito
MEDIAS AGUAS
ESTERO RABÓN
TENOCHTITLAN
SAN LORENZO
POTRERO NUEVO
Modern settlement
Archaeological site
More than 600' elevation
Swamp
N
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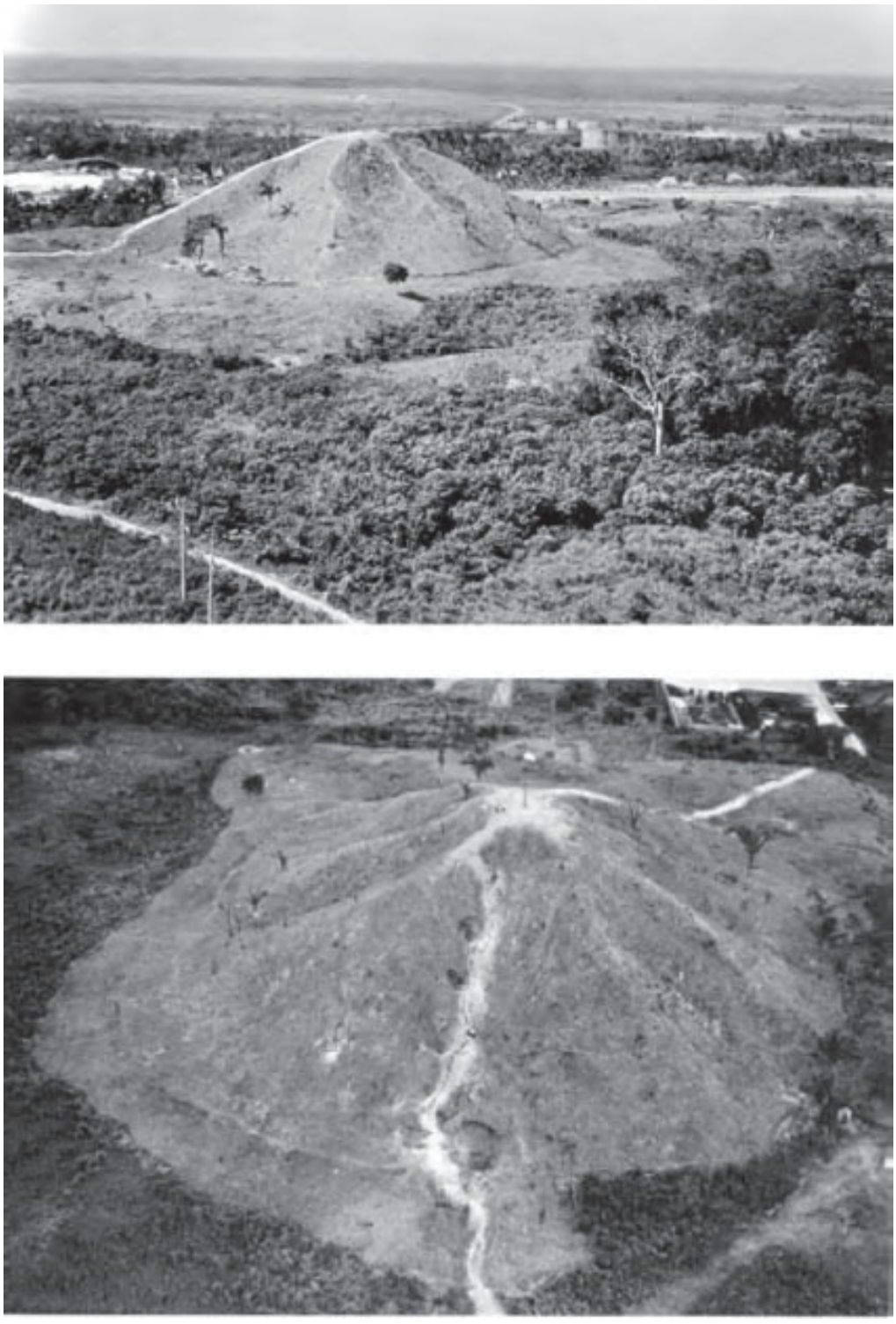
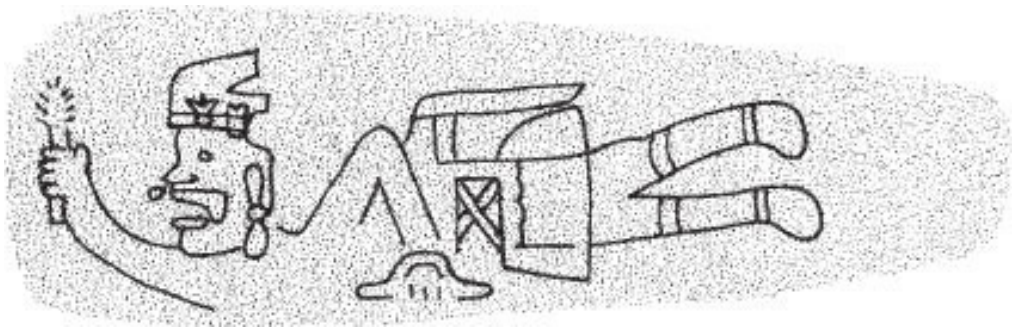
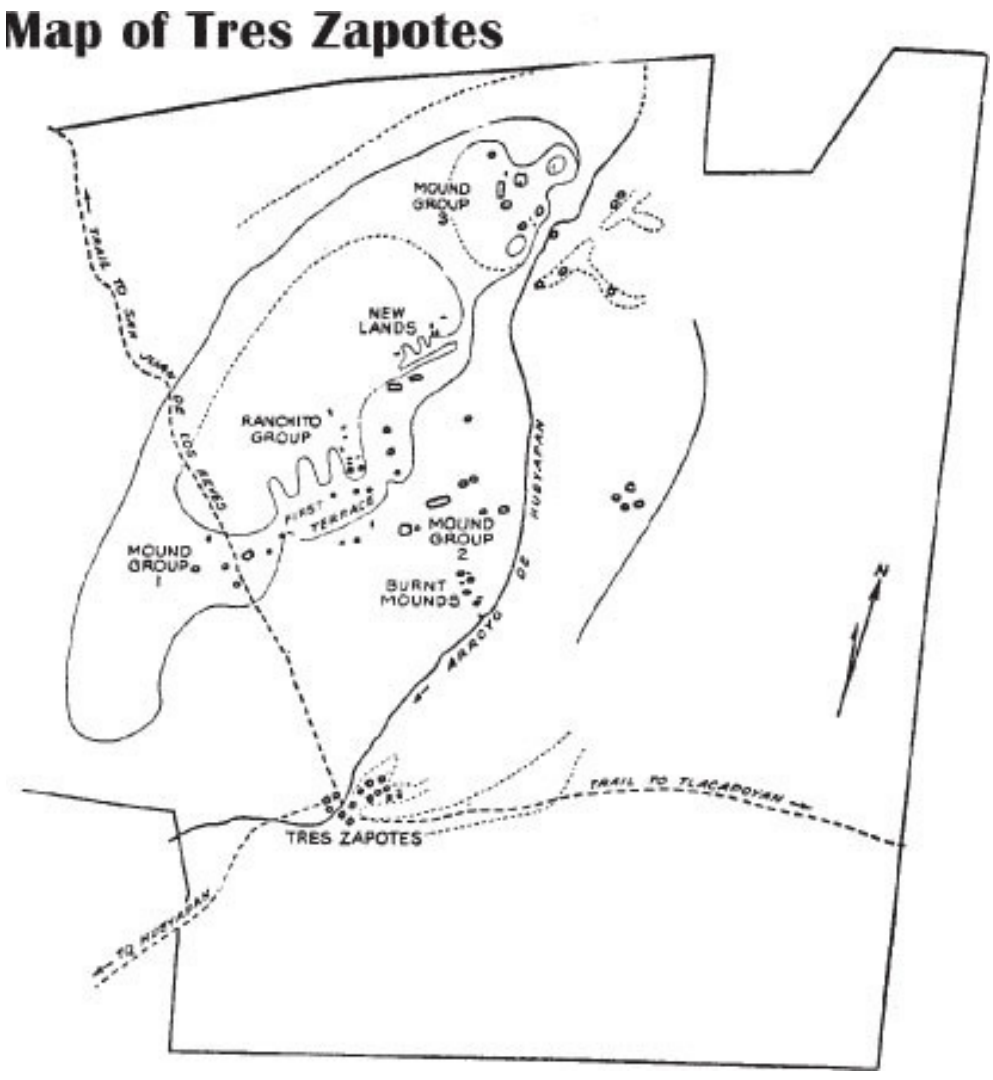
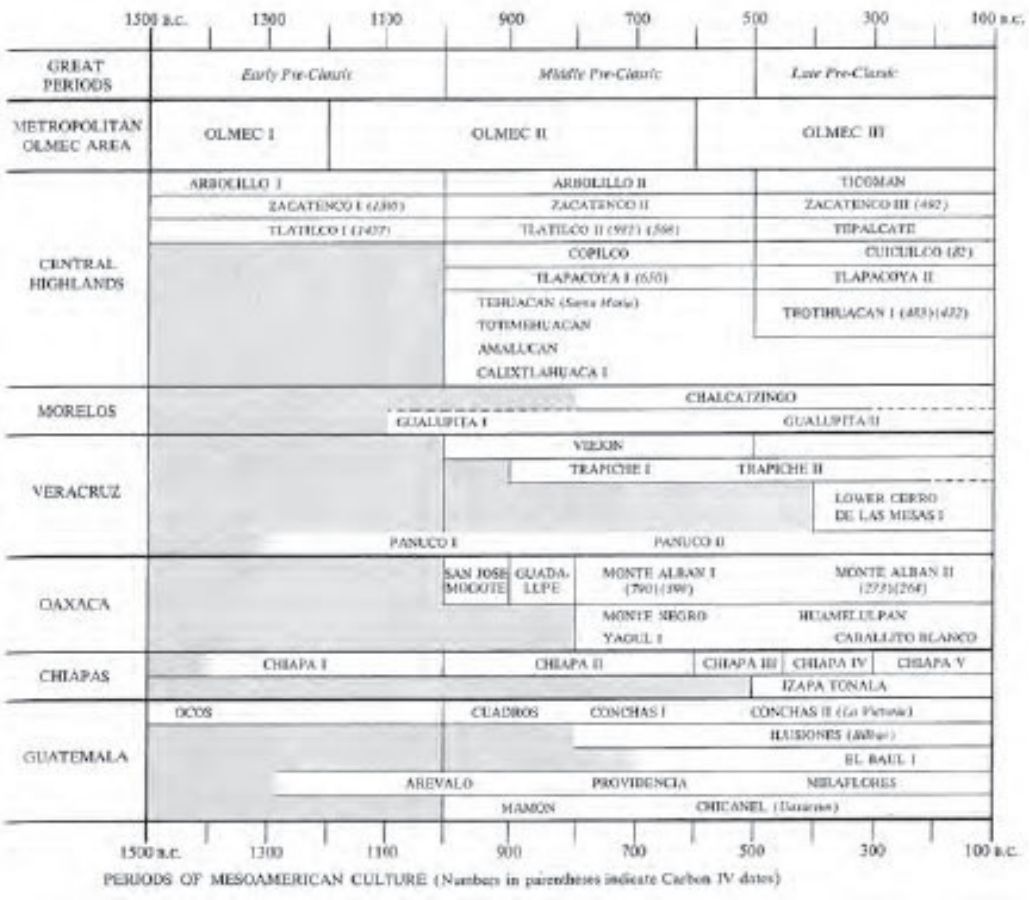


Aerial views of the La Venta site, circa 1966.



The famous “flying Olmec” carved onto a jade celt, now at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.



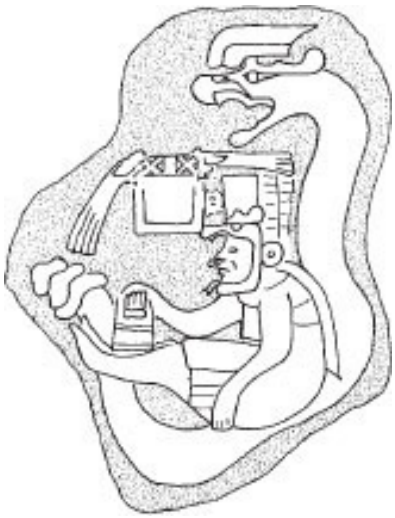


PERIODS OF MESOAMERICAN CULTURE (Numbers in parentheses indicate Carbon IV dates)

SEQUENCE OF CULTURES IN THE OLMEC AREA

Dates	Bernal	Drucker, Heizer, Squier, Weiant, etc.	Piña Chán	Coe
100 B.C. +	Post-Olmec	Lirios, San Marcos, Soncautla, Upper Tres Zapotes I (in part) and II		Villa Alta Postclassic
600–100 B.C.	Olmec III	Post-La Venta–Upper Tres Zapotes I (in part)	La Venta III	Palangana phase 600–400 B.C.
1200–600 B.C.	Olmec II	La Venta Phases I–IV, Middle Tres Zapotes	La Venta II (up to 200 B.C.)	San Lorenzo phase 1200–900 B.C.
1500–1200 B.C.	Olmec I	Pre-La Venta, Early Tres Zapotes	La Venta I	Pre-San Lorenzo before 1200 B.C.

La Venta Monument 19, now in the archeological park in Villahermosa. An Olmec, wearing a helmet and holding a satchel in front of him, sits within the coils of a rattlesnake with a feathered crest, making this the oldest depiction of the “feathered serpent.” Does the mysterious satchel hold sacred jade oracle sticks, dried magic mushrooms, or something else of great importance?

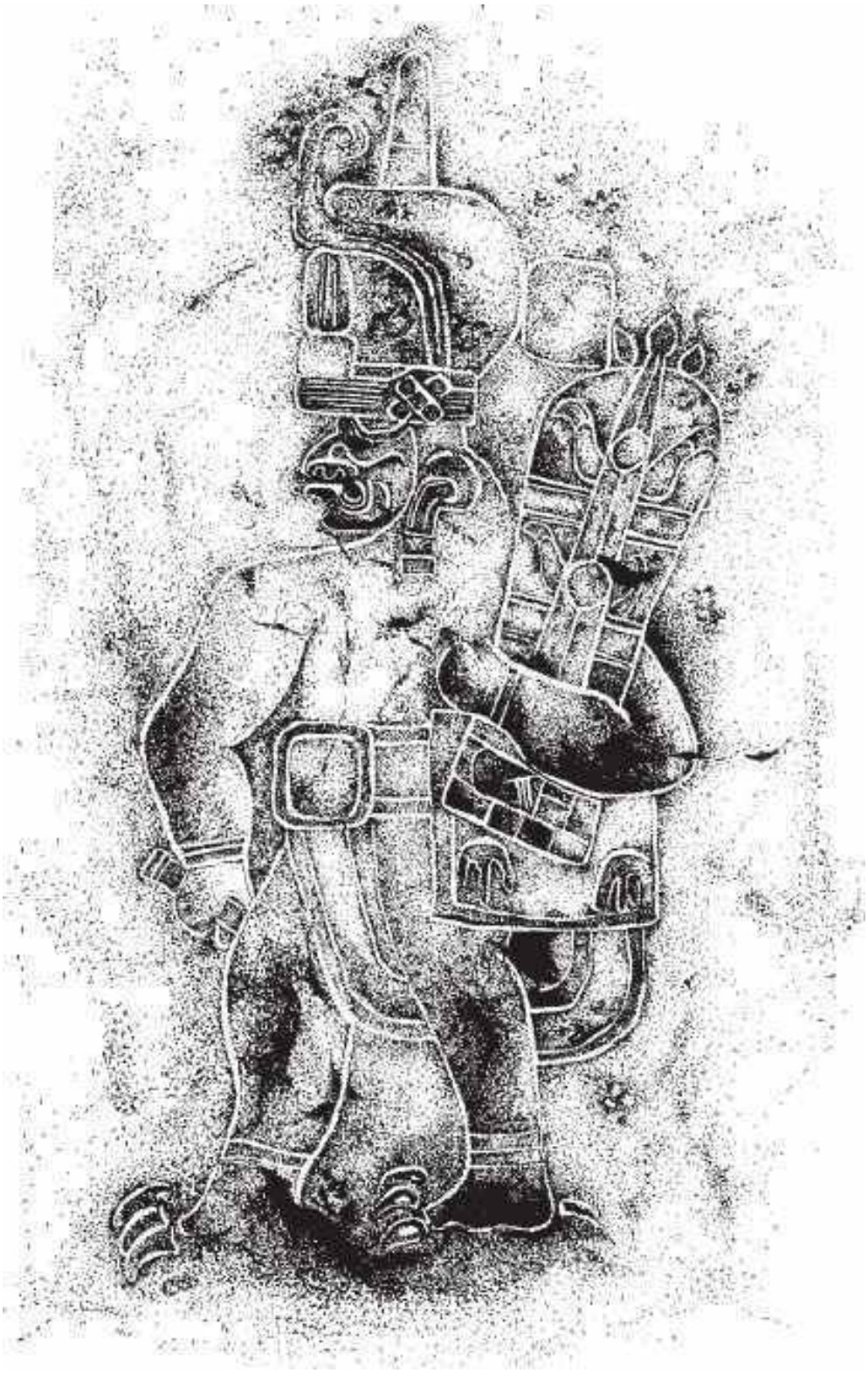


Colossal heads discovered at San Lorenzo, Veracruz, and now in Xalapa.

Stele D from Tres Zapotes. Note elaborate headresses and man with beard.

Pock marked head from San Lorenzo, now at the Xalapa Anthropology Museum. It is a mystery how and why these man-made pock marks were later scooped into the hard basalt statue.

Olmec Birdman stele from San Miguel Amuco, Guerrero.



Olmec Birdman-Were-Jaguar from Xoc, Chiapas.

Top: La Venta Altar 5 showing an Olmec emerging from a cave with a baby (a eunuch?). Bottom: Southside of the monument.

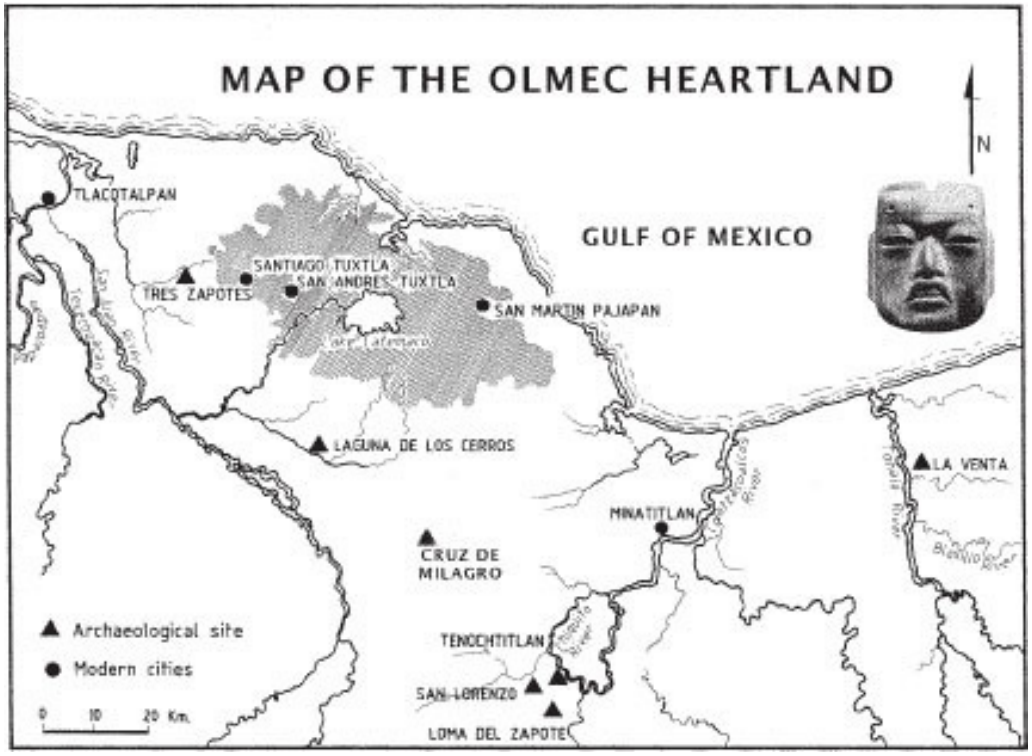
La Venta Altar 5, southside of the monument.

Tres Zapotes colossal head, first discovered in 1860.

San Lorenzo, Monument 4, now in the Xalapa Museum.

Colossal head discovered at La Venta, circa 1945.

San Lorenzo Olmec statue apparently with a fake beard and Egyptian-looking headdress.



Olmec figurines from Bernal's book, *The Olmec World*.

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2.

THE MYSTERY OF THE OLMEC DESTRUCTION

§§§

Even though it was night, even though it was not day,
even though there was no light they gathered,
the gods convened there in Teotihuacan
—Nahautl Myth on the End of the Fourth World

We shall save it… because there is no longer the sight of the Book of Counsel… There was once the sight of it, and it was written long ago… Great was its account and its description of when was finished the birth of all heaven and earth…
— *Book of the Popul Vuh*, Edmunsen translation, 1971

Hunab Ku and the Destruction of the Fourth World

According to the Mayas and the Aztecs, there have been four previous worlds and we are now in the Fifth World. Each of the prior worlds was destroyed in one cataclysm or another, either by ice, water or fire. As one world is destroyed, another is reborn with new inhabitants and a new order. Our current Fifth World is to be destroyed as well, presumably by water.

All the different cultures in Mesoamerica, and to some degree the American Southwest, shared cultural similarities. They also shared certain myths, including creation stories and the myth of the destruction of previous worlds. Versions of these myths vary from area to area, and trying to sort them out is often confusing. The fact that they are often found in fragments, having been salvaged from ancient ruins, does not help matters. That these myths are unclear, and the details are highly variable, there is an overall theme that is similar in all the accounts.

We do not have any direct legends of the Olmecs, but since remnants of their society trickled through to later civilizations (such as art motifs, writing and the calendar) one wonders if their mythology and cosmology were also adopted by. We have the traditions of the Aztecs, Mixtecs, Maya and others telling of the four worlds that preceded our current Fifth World.

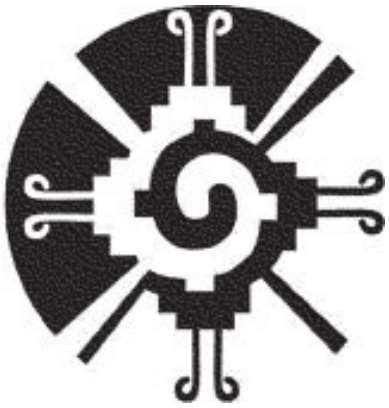
One question arises immediately in connection with the Olmecs: were they destroyed in one of cataclysms at the end of one of the previous worlds, or did they "arrive" at the beginning of the Fifth World, as the Maya claim they themselves did.

Let us first look at the Aztec (most recent) version of the destruction of the four worlds. The French archeologist Jacques Soustelle gives a good explanation of the previous worlds of the Aztecs in his book, *The Four Suns.* Says Soustelle:

> Our universe, according to the ancient Mexicans, is the fifth in a series. Four Suns have preceded it. On the Aztec calendar, their hieroglyphs are engraved within the four branches of the sign *ollin.* They are called:
>
> *Naui-Ocelotl*, "Four-Jaguar." Tradition has it that men were devoured by jaguars. But for the most ancient peoples of Mexico, that feline was the symbol of the dark forces of the earth, symbol of all the mystery which prowls "in the heart of the mountains." For the more recent Mexicans of the Tolteco-Aztec period, the feline represented Tezcatlipoca, god of the night sky, strewn with stars as the robe of the jaguar is sprinkled with spots.
>
> *Naui-Eecatl*, "Four-Wind." This time, it was the tempest that put an end to the Sun; a magical storm since, under its influence, men were turned into monkeys. The emblem of this world is the mask of the god of wind, who, in turn, is but one of the forms of Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent and eternal rival of Tezcatlipoca.
>
> *Naui-Quiauitl*, "Four-Rain." A rain of fire *(tlequauitl)* came pelting down in this universe and annihilated it. This cosmic period is symbolized by Tlaloc, god of the beneficial rain but also of the thunder and lightning, the mountains and the volcanoes.
>
> *Naui-Atl*, "Four-Water." The deluge lasted fifty-two years. A single couple survived, having taken shelter in the trunk of a huge cypress tree. But since they disobeyed the orders of Tezcatlipoca, this man and this woman who had escaped from the fourth universe were turned into dogs. The Plumed Serpent was obliged to descend into the subterranean world, steal the bones of the dead ancients from the darkness and pour its own blood over them so that the present race of men could come to life.

Because the Mayas are supposedly descended from the Olmecs, we may get the most accurate account of the destruction of the Four Worlds from them. According to the legends in the *Popul Vuh* and *Chilam Balam* of the Quiché Maya, the Supreme Creator god Hunab Ku created four worlds in succession, rebuilding the landscape four times after deluges had poured from the mouth of the sky serpent.The sky fell to the earth, and now four gods, begat by Hunab Ku, known as the Bacab stand at earth's corners and hold up the sky, much like in the myth of Atlas.

In the beginning, according to the sacred Mayan manuscript called the *Popul Vuh*, Hunab Ku was all that existed. Hunab Ku is a controversial god in Mayan studies. As the greatest god in the Mayan pantheon, few images of him exist, since he was considered to be without form.



Hunab Ku glyph.

He was the supreme creator of the Maya, and was called "god of the gods." The glyph for the number one, (called hun in the Mayan language) is a dot, or a small circle representing a dot and is associated with Hunab Ku, "the one." José Arguelles claims in his book *The Mayan Factor* that there is a glyph for Hunab Ku, which he calls the "cosmic butterfly." In the few representations of Hunab Ku that we have, such as those found on some ceramic plates, Hunab Ku is seen as the "First Creator Being" in the guise of the young maize god, "resurrecting" to new life by splitting his own skull and emerging as a new maize god. Hunab Ku, while being one, was also dual, as the god embodied his feminine version as well. The symbol for Hunab Ku is very much like a yin-yang symbol, and is said to represent the solar calendar, the duality of creation, balanced forces and perfection. In this way, he is similar to the concept of the unknowable "Tao."

Some archeologists and astrophysicists now surmise that Hunab Ku is the symbol that the ancient Mayans used for the gateway to other galaxies beyond our sun. This would make it a “star gate” similar to the portal the Egyptians believed would facilitate their souls going forward into a part of the sky known as the “duat.” Other theorists along these lines claim that Hunab Ku is the galactic center, the literal core that our galaxy revolves around.

In addition to the four children known as the Bacab who ruled over the four corners of the world, Hunab Ku also begat Itzamna, often known as “the son of Hunab Ku.” Itzamna is considered to be the founder of the Mayan culture. He is credited with introducing maize and cacao and teaching them writing, healing, and the use of calendars. As the bringer of culture he became the state-god of the Mayan empire. As the moon-god he ruled over the night. Itzamna also bore the title of “lord of knowledge.”

Two different hieroglyphs were used to represent Itzamna. The first was a conventional representation of his own head, and the second was a design that featured the symbol for the day Ahau. This day sign means king, emperor, monarch, prince or great lord, thus giving Itzamna the position of chief of the Mayan gods, as well as being patron of the day Ahau, the last of the twenty Mayan days. Itzamna is said to be similar to the Aztec god Ometeotl.

In Mayan mythology, Hunab Ku first created the earth with the aide of seven lesser gods, including the gods Tepeu and Gucumatz who are referred to as the Creators, the Makers, and the Forefathers among the various gods. They were two of the first beings to exist and were said to be very wise. Huracan, or the Heart of Heaven, was also an early god but not given the personification that typified other gods. Huracan acted more like a terrible storm, and it is from his name that we get our word “hurricane.”

Deep in the mists of time, Tepeu and Gucumatz had a conference with other gods, such as Huracan, and decided that, in order to preserve their legacy, they must create a race of beings that would worship them. Huracan did the actual creating while Tepeu and Gucumatz guided the process. The Earth was created, but the gods made several false starts in their efforts to mold beings who could sufficiently adore them. Animals were created first; however, all of their howling and squawking did not constitute worship, and they were thus banished forever to the forest.

Man was then created of mud, but these early humans just dissolved and crumbled away. Other gods were then summoned to help in the creation process and man was next created out of wood. But these “doll people” had no soul, and soon forgot their creators. This caused the gods to destroy the world by bringing a black resinous rain down on their heads—the doll people fled to the forest and became monkeys.

The gods convened again with additional gods and then created a new man, this time out of corn dough. This new man was the man of today, according to the Mayans. To them, corn meal was not just the cornerstone of their diet, but their own substance came from the high yield vegetable. The earliest cultivated maize plants have been found in Olman and are attributed to the earliest proto-Olmecs. Perhaps the Olmecs began at this time,and the reference to maize comes from their still unknown legends.

The Hopis of northern Arizona have a similar tradition of the recurrent destructions of worlds and the emergence of new ones. They believe, however, that we currently live in the Fourth World—which is soon coming to an end! The Hopis also believe that the different types and colors of maize were distributed to different peoples, and they, the Hopi, were given the blue corn.

Above, I have tried to distill out the main points in the Maya creation story as told in the *Popul Vuh*, but a lot of controversy surrounds its interpretation. Some people think that each attempt by the gods to create beings to worship them ended in a destruction (the animals were the First World, the clay men were the Second World, etc.). However, the first time the *Popul Vuh* specifically describes a destruction is after the wood people. Ancient texts are often ambiguous or even self-contradictory (there are two creation stories in the book of *Genesis* in the Bible), and there is no universally-accepted framework for when the Maya destructions occurred. It is clear that they believed four previous worlds were destroyed by deluge. The *Popul Vuh* mentions that the water poured from the sky from the mouth of a sky serpent, but alternatively, the water came from a bowl held by Hunab Ku. After the destruction of the Fourth World, the Maya ascended to people the Fifth World. But this world will also be destroyed—some say at the end of the Mayan calendar in the year 2012.

The Olmecs and the End of the Fourth World

Who was destroyed at the end of the Fourth World? Was it the Olmecs, who were clearly the Maya's predecessors in Mesoamerica? When was this destruction?

The general demise of the Olmecs, or at least the area around La Venta, considered the "capital" of Olman, happened around 400-500 BC. At around this time, all of this area was abandoned and Olmec-style art began to diminish. Did an earthquake cause the rivers to change course, flooding the area and turning it into a swamp? Was the end of the Fourth World the flooding of La Venta?

Says Richard Diehl in *The Olmecs:*

> Olmec civilization had run its course by 400 BC. La Venta, San Lorenzo, and large sections of the riverine lowland zone lay abandoned, artisans no longer created Olmec-style sculptures, jades, and pots, and the extensive trade networks that had once connected Olman with the rest of Mesoamerica ceased to function. Nevertheless people continued to occupy the area and a new civilization sometimes called Epi-Olmec evolved at Tres Zapotes on the northern edge of the Tuxtla mountains.
>
> What happened to Olmec culture? When and why did it disappear? After decades of speculation, archaeologists finally have partial answers to these questions. The period of the decline can be narrowed down to the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ… La Venta's Great Pyramid, and probably the rest of the city as well, was abandoned by the beginning of the fourth century BC. Palangana-phase San Lorenzo and the numerous villages and hamlets surrounding it were deserted at approximately the same time. These were not temporary population movements; the lower Coatzacoalcos region was uninhabited for at least a millennium and la

Venta's hinterland remained virtually uninhabited until the mid-twentieth century.

Having dated the Olmec decline, what might account for it? Cultural decline and decay are normal occurrences in human history, the kind of regular transformations that happen to all civilizations. However, only rarely do farming populations abandonentireregionsforcenturies,unlesssomething prevents them from returning. Archeologists concerned with the Olmec collapse have focused on two basic explanations: environmental changes and human actions. At the moment our best evidence relates to the former, but archaeologists have only recently begun seriously to investigate the problem.

Recent studies by Mexican geomorphologists show that the rivers around La Venta and San Lorenzo are dynamic systems that experienced constant changes over the past 4,000 years. San Lorenzo's decline at the end of the Early Formative period coincided with pronounced channel shifts in the Coatzacoalcos river and the same happened at La Venta 500 years later. Natural processes triggered these shifts: tectonic uplift and coastal subsidence created new topographies, while rising sea levels worldwide drowned coastal margins and silt and volcanic ash clogged rivers. The silt was washed off from expanding agricultural fields while the ash came from eruptions in the nearby highlands.

Diehl discusses "tectonic uplift" and "coastal subsidence" as being behind the earth changes causing the abandonment of the La Venta area. These are very slow geological processes, and may have to do with gradual changes in the dynamic river systems throughout the region, but it seems likely to me that the events causing the exodus of the people—who never returned—must have been more violent.

Earthquakes can also change the course of rivers, and they do it fast and furious. In 1811 and 1812 a series of quakes rocked the American Midwest when the New Madrid fault became active. The grandest quake on February 7,1812 had its epicenter in rural southern Missouri but was felt thousands of miles away in Boston (where church bells rang!). The course of the mighty Mississippi River was permanently changed, and the great waterway flowed backward for several days. Could a similar scenario have played out around La Venta? Seismic activity can also trigger volcanic activity, and there are plenty of volcanoes around Mexico. If a combination

of such cataclysmic events in fact caused the abandonment of the Olmec Heartland, it may very well have seemed like the end of the world, and was certainly the end of life as it had been known. Perhaps the people witnessing the destruction of their environs thought it was some vengeance of the gods— the water-wrath of Hunab Ku and the end of the Fourth World.

Did the rise of the Maya coincide with the destruction of the cities of the Olmecs? The Maya were known to have taken over cities like Piedras Negras, Uaxactun, Izapa and Comacalco after they were first occupied by the Olmecs. But other cities of the Olmecs were just no longer there. This is one of the few “facts” we know about the Olmecs: parts of their world were destroyed, their statues buried, their lands laid desolate and their memory erased. It was only modern oil exploration and later archeological investigations that brought these forgotten people to light. The exciting discoveries of the colossal heads in the 1930s and 40s were tantamount to uncovering a lost world—a world that had apparently been destroyed in some cataclysm! Further work around La Venta will certainly shed more light on this subject.

When trying to make sense of the different “worlds” of the Maya and other Native American groups, a good start is to look at the various cataclysms that have befallen civilizations. These include volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, earthquakes, severe weather and droughts, plus

invasion from hostile tribes. All of these things are known to have occurred in Mexico and its surroundings. Were any of these destructions part of the “end of one world, and the beginning of the next”? It would seem to make sense that destructive events like these are associated with the succession of worlds.

The destruction of one of the worlds may have been the cataclysmic events that ended the last age about 12,000 years ago. The ending of this ice age saw huge destruction in the Pacific Northwest when huge lakes in Montana, the Dakotas and Alberta broke through an ice dam and poured west into the Pacific. A similar lake in Utah and Wyoming poured through northern Arizona, possibly creating the Grand Canyon (geologists now speculate that the Grand Canyon was created quickly over thousands of years, rather than millions). The extinction of mammoths and other large animals occurred at this time.

In the years 500 BC to 250 AD there was considerable volcanic activity in the Central Valley of Mexico and another Olmec citadel was destroyed at the end of this period. The mysterious circular pyramid at Cuicuilco was covered with flowing lava at this time. Today Cuicuilco is surrounded by the Mexico City Olympic Village. It is 17 meters high and 100 meters in diameter. Most of the site of Cuicuilco is covered by the lava flow from the Xitle volcano nearby.

Cuicuilco was first excavatedby the Mexican archaeologist Manuel Gamio in 1917 when he found an overgrown hill off the main road south from the city. It turned out to be a truncated “pyramid” or cone. It has four galleries and a central staircase to the summit. Cuicuilco is said to be one of the oldest structures in the Valley of Mexico.

It is generally thought that Cuicuilco is one of the oldest structures in all of Mesoamerica, dating from around 700 BC. It is also thought to be associated with the Olmecs. Says Wikipedia about the site:

> Cuicuilco was an ancient city in the central Mexican highlands, on the southern shore of the Lake Texcoco in the southeastern Valley of Mexico. Today, it is a significant archaeological site that was occupied during the Mesoamerican Middle and Late Formative (ca. 700 B.C. to A.D. 150). Based on its date of occupation, Cuicuilco may be the oldest city in the Valley of Mexico and was roughly contemporary with, and

possibly interacting with the Olmec of the Gulf Coast of lowland Veracruz and Tabasco (also known as the Olmec heartland).

Cuicuilco was originally founded as a farming village, but presents evidence of early religious practices including stone offerings and the use of ceramics as grave goods. The city grew around a large ceremonial center with pyramids and an associated urban area that included plazas and avenues bordering a series of small, shallow pools. These pools were fed by runoff from the nearby hills of Zacayuca and Zacaltepetl. Population at the city's peak is estimated at 20,000 people. Site features include terraces, various buildings, fortifications, and irrigation ditches and canals.

Archaeologists conclude that Cuicuilco was a prominent community prior to the emergence of Teotihuacan as an urban center, noting that the six small communities which eventually combined to become Teotihuacan were founded and showing evidence of modest growth during the time Cuicuilco was building pyramids and public monuments. The city seems to have been abandoned around A.D. 150 to 200 after the eruption of a nearby volcano, Xitle, although the territory was reoccupied at a much later date. Pottery, and other evidence, suggest that refugees from the volcanic disaster migrated north and became part of the population pool of Teotihuacan, near the northern shore of the Lake Texcoco.

To demonstrate how dating ancient monuments can be very controversial and confusing, early geologists thought that the lava flow covering much of the pyramid of Cuicuilco was over 7,000 years old (and therefore the pyramid would have to have been even older!). In the prestigious publication *National Geographic* (issue no. 44, published in 1923, pages 202-220). In 1922, the author of the article, an archaeologist named Byron Cummings, became interested in the site when he learned that a geologist named George E. Hyde had estimated the age of the flow that covered the pyramid (called the Pedregal lava flow at that time and now called the Xitle flow), as being 7,000 years old. Curiously Cummings mentions a strange blue light that appeared at the top of the pyramid when they began to excavate it. The workers were encouraged, believing that it signaled that an Aztec treasure must lie in the mound.

Recent carbon dating on charcoal of burned plants found underneath the lava flow now indicate a date of about 245 AD. No matter how old Cuicuilco is, it is a very ancient city, something that surprised early archeologists. Says Bernal in his book *A History of Mexican Archeology:*

> In 1917 Gamio arranged to explore below the lava in the area of Copilco, and had tunnels dug for the purpose. The finds were sensational: the remains of buildings, burials, stone tools and an abundance of pottery which was clearly similar in style in style to that from Potzalco were unearthed, indicating that they must belong to the Archaic.

If La Venta was destroyed circa 400 BC, did the displaced inhabitants relocate to the Valley of Mexico, to sites already established such as Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan?

The Mystery of Teotihuacan

Aztec Nahuatl myths state that the "gods" gathered at Teotihuacan at the end of the Fourth World and the beginning of the Fifth World:

Even though it was night,
even though it was not day,
even though there was no light
they gathered,
the gods convened
there in Teotihuacan.

According to the Aztec Nahautl mythology, Teotihuacan was in existence when a cataclysmic change turned the day to night, and the sun did not rise. The men, or "gods" of Teotihuacan had to save the world and make the sun return to sky.

Says Michael Coe in his 1962 book *Mexico*, "The most humble of them all, Nanhuatzin, the 'Purulent One', cast himself into the flames and became the sun. But the heavenly bodies did not move, so *all* the gods, sacrificed themselves for mankind. Finally, government was established there; the lords of Teotihuacan were 'wise men, knowers of occult things, possessors of the traditions.' When they died, pyramids were built above them. The largest of the pyramids, those of the Sun and Moon, were said by tradition to have been built by the giants which existed in those days."

Not only do we see a Biblical parallel in this myth, that of a cataclysmic change in which the sun did not come forth, but also that “there were giants in the earth in those days.” *(Genesis* 6:4)

Were these wise these ‘wise men, knowers of occult things, possessors of the traditions’ actually the Olmecs, moving inland from ‘The Destruction of the Heartland’? They would logically be the “possessors of the traditions.”

The early beginnings of Teotihuacan are thought to go back to a time when Cuicuilco was also occupied, with the earliest buildings being dated to around 200 BC and the largest pyramid, the Pyramid of the Sun being completed by 100 BC.

In the 1950s a leading archaeologist, M. Covarrubias, incredulously admitted that radiocarbon dating gave the place “the almost impossible date of 900 BC.” *(Indian Art of Mexico and Central America).* Further radiocarbon tests gave a date of 1474 BC and now a date of circa 1400 BC is accepted by some archeologists. If these dates are correct, they would be pushing the age of Teotihuacan back by a thousand years, to a time when the Olmecs were making their colossal stone heads.

The dating of archeological sites is always tricky: you can establish a date for a site by dating something organic, such as bone, wood or with other techniques, pottery, but the stone structures at the site may actually be hundreds of years older than that organic material. Sites like Teotihuacan are known to have been abandoned and reinhabited several times. Give the date coming out for the antiquity of this site it is entirely plausible the Olmecs migrated here after the destruction of La Venta.

One reason that the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan was built where it currently stands was the discovery in 1971 of an extraordinary cave underneath the pyramid. There is a natural lava tube enlarged and elaborated in ancient times, running 100 meters in an easterly direction six meters beneath the pyramid, in from the stairway on its main axis, reaching a multi-chambered terminus shaped something like a four-leaf clover.

Says Michael Coe, “It will be recalled that Aztec tradition placed the creation of the Sun and Moon, and even the present universe, at Teotihuacan. The ancient use of the cave predates the pyramid, and it remained a cult center after its construction. Unfortunately, official excavations carried out in it were never published, but scholars such as

Doris Heyden and Professor Millon note that in pre-Conquest Mexico such caverns were symbolic wombs from which gods like the Sun and the Moon, and the ancestors of mankind. emerged in the mythological past. While there is no spring within the cave, there were channels of U-shaped drains (recalling Olmec prototypes), so that water was probably brought into the cave to flow through them. This immensely holy spot was eventually looted of its contents and sealed off, but the memory of its location may have persisted into Aztec times."

Coe notes that official reports of the cave were never published. One wonders what was found inside this underground vault that was so important that it had to be suppressed? Important finds such as an ancient cave system beneath Mexico's most important pyramid are not the sort of discoveries that archaeologists find uninteresting. Something of such an unusual nature, a discovery that would rock the then accepted archaeological notions of ancient Mexico, must have been discovered in this tunnel. It might be something as trivial as a carbon date on organic material that goes back tens of thousands of years, or something more significant such as clearly identifiable objects from the Middle East or some other distant area.

It is interesting to note that many of the pyramids in Mesoamerica are built over natural cave systems. There may be many more such natural caves under known pyramids in North America that have yet to be discovered, but probably never will be.

The very first excavations of the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan, only undertaken in 2004, uncovered the bones of dozens of adult males. Reported on December 6, 2004, by *The Guardian* of London, it was revealed that 10 of the men had been decapitated and all of them were apparently offered up to the gods. Three other smaller-scale human

offerings were also found during the project, which tunneled deep into the solid stone-and-earth structure.

Mexican archaeologist Ruben Cabrera said that the burial included two high-status males richly adorned with, among other things, jawbone-shaped shell necklaces typical of Mesoamerican warriors. The pair, possibly killed by small jade daggers in their backs, were accompanied by 10 other headless adults with bound hands and feet. The bones of pumas, jaguars, coyotes, wolves, eagles and snakes filled in any gaps, along with a cache of stunningly crafted artifacts including obsidian sacrificial knives.

Cabrera said that shortly after the Pyramid of the Sun is thought to have beenbuiltaroundAD300, Teotihuacan covered eight square miles and housed some 150,000 people. Three hundred years later it disappeared, consumed, according to one theory, by a popular uprising sparked by a scarcity of crops. Curiously, he said that today Teotihuacan is one of the most studied of the pre-Columbian civilizations, but remains one of the least understood.

During Teotihuacan’s height, around sixth century AD, it is estimated that the city had a population of 200,000 people. This would have made it the sixth largest city in the world at the time, according to Michael Coe.

At this time, Teotihuacan was a Toltec city. It is accepted that the Toltecs occupied the pyramid complex after it was built. Its builders were often referred to simply as the Teotihuacan Culture. The Teotihuacan Culture was associated with the Olmecs and known to be have had an Epi-Olmec influence. With the discoveries at Chalcatzingo in the 1960s and 70s

and the recent discovery of the new Olmec site of Zazacatla near the town of Xochitepec, the strong influence of the Olmecs in the Valley of Mexico and Lake Texcoco area is now considered a fact.

For centuries Teotihuacan was the major city of all of Mesoamerica, trading at least as far as Costa Rica in the south and Arizona in the north. It was renowned for its tools, weapons, and artifacts made of obsidian and its cultural and religious influence extended widely. Toltec wars spread deep into the Petén area and the Yucatán. Then, suddenly, Teotihuacan was abandoned and it became a ghost city of the gods.

It is generally believed that the abandonment of Teotihuacan coincided with the rise of Tollan-Tula fifty miles to the north as the new Toltec capital. The Toltecs apparently built Tollan-Tula as a mini-version of Teotihuacan.

Teotihuacan: A Water City

Recent evidence shows that Teotihuacan was a city that was designed by highly skilled engineers who intended the pyramid complex to be a canal city with artificial canals and lakes. These artificial canals and lakes were mistaken for streets and plazas by early archeologists who never imagined that the city had been originally designed to be flooded.

How beautiful it would have appeared: giant pyramids reflected in large pools of water, floating gardens of colorful lilies and other flowers, boats docking at the steps of one of the many temples or pyramids. For many years Teotihuacan would have flourished as one of the largest and most beautiful cities in the world.

Ancient astronaut author Zechariah Sitchin postulates that the tunnel system found under the Pyramid of the Sun and other tunnels within the pyramid were used as a sort of waterworks. Says Sitchin, “That the original cave was converted to some purpose intentionally is evidenced by the ceiling being made of heavy stone blocks and that the tunnel’s walls are smoothed with plaster… using a variety of materials; the floors, laid in segments, were man-made; drainage pipes were provided for now unknown purposes (perhaps connected to an underground watercourse now extinct). Finally, the tunnel ends below the fourth stage of the pyramid in a hollowed-out area that resembles a cloverleaf, supported by adobe columns and basalt slabs.”

Speaking of the long “Avenue of the Dead” that runs the length of the site Sitchin says:

> The Avenue’s cavity is further lined with walls and low structures, resulting in six semi-subterranean compartments open to the sky. The perpendicular walls are fitted with sluices at their floor level. The impression is that the whole complex served to channel water that flowed down the Avenue. The flow may have begun at the Pyramid of the Moon (where a subterranean tunnel was found encircling it), and been linked in some manner to the subterranean tunnel of the Pyramid of the Sun. The series of compartments then retained and eventually let out the water from one to the other, until ultimately the water reached the diverting channel of the San Juan river.
>
> Could these artificially flowing and cascading waters have been the reason for decorating the facade of the Quetzalcoatl Pyramid with wavy waters—at an inland site, hundreds of miles away from the sea?

It would seem that Teotihuacan was laid out and constructed as some kind of waterwork, employing water to flood the city. Was it for some technological processes? In support of that theory is the curious discovery of huge sheets of mica around the Pyramid of the Sun.

Sitchin concludes:

> Alongside the third segment down from the Pyramid of the Sun, excavations of a series of interconnected subterranean chambers revealed that some of the floors were covered with layers of thick sheets of mica. This is a silicone whose special properties make it resistant to water, heat, and electrical currents. It has therefore been used as an insulator in various chemical processes and electrical and electronic applications, and in recent times in nuclear and space technologies.
>
> The particular properties of mica depend to some extent on its content of other trace minerals, and thus on its geographic source. According to expert opinions the mica found at Teotihuacan is of a type that is found only in faraway Brazil. Traces of this mica were also found on remains removed from the Pyramid of the Sun’s stages when it was being uncovered early in this century. What was the use to which this insulating material was put at Teotihuacan?

> Our own impression is that the presence of… the sloping avenue; the series of structures, subterranean chambers, tunnels; the diverted river; the semi-subterranean sections with their sluices; and the underground compartments lined with mica—were all components of a scientifically conceived plant for the separation, refining or purification of mineral substances.

So the evidence mounts that that Teotihuacan was a city with large amounts of flowing water, possibly used as a huge refinery for gold or other metals. Sitchin also maintains that the ruins of Tiahuanaco, in Bolivia, were built for a similar purpose and this city also had underground channels for large amounts of water. It is interesting to note the similarity in the names between the two ancient and massive structures. That the mica used at Teotihuacan allegedly came from Brazil is a point in itself that would change our entire notion of trade between ancient North and South America.

What was the purpose of the sheets of mica? Clearly, it must have been by boat (since the ancient Mexicans are not generally acknowledged to have had aircraft), but why was it so important to bring these mineral sheets? Did it have something to do with some mining process such as washing out the ore, as Sitchin claims, or did it serve some other purpose, perhaps with charging the water all around the city or to make it a glittering object easily seen from a distance?

Recent discoveries at Teotihuacan have shown that the sacrifices found in the Pyramid of the Moon involved victims brought from quite a distance. This, like other recent evidence, shows that Mesoamericans, including the Olmecs, traveled great distances, even in the remote past. Though the victims discovered at Teotihuacan were from a later period in its long history, it does show that people traveled long distances in ancient Mesoamerica.

Says the Reuters dispatch from Mexico City on April 11, 2007:

> Ancient Mexicans brought human sacrifice victims from hundreds of miles away over centuries to sanctify a pyramid in the oldest city in North America, an archaeologist said Wednesday.
>
> DNA tests on the skeletons of more than 50 victims discovered in 2004 in the Pyramid of the Moon at the Teotihuacan ruins revealed they

were from faraway Mayan, Pacific or Atlantic coastal cultures.

The bodies, many of which were decapitated, dated from between A.D. 50 and 500, and were killed at different times to dedicate new stages of construction of the pyramid just north of Mexico City.

The victims were likely either captured in war or obtained through some kind of diplomacy, said archaeologist Ruben Cabrera, who led the excavation at the pyramid. The Pyramid of the Moon and the larger Pyramid of the Sun are the two main pyramids at Teotihuacan, which housed 200,000 inhabitants at its height of power, around the year 500.

“Teotihuacan may have had a tradition of capturing prisoners for sacrifice,” said Cabrera.

Ancient Mexican civilizations like the Aztecs sacrificed humans by cutting their hearts out, but researchers are not sure how the victims at Teotihuacan were killed.

Little is known about the race that inhabited Teotihuacan or what language they spoke. The site, Mexico’s oldest major archaeological site, was revered by later Mesoamerican civilizations, including the Aztecs, who gave it its current name, meaning “The place where gods are made” in their Nahuatl language.

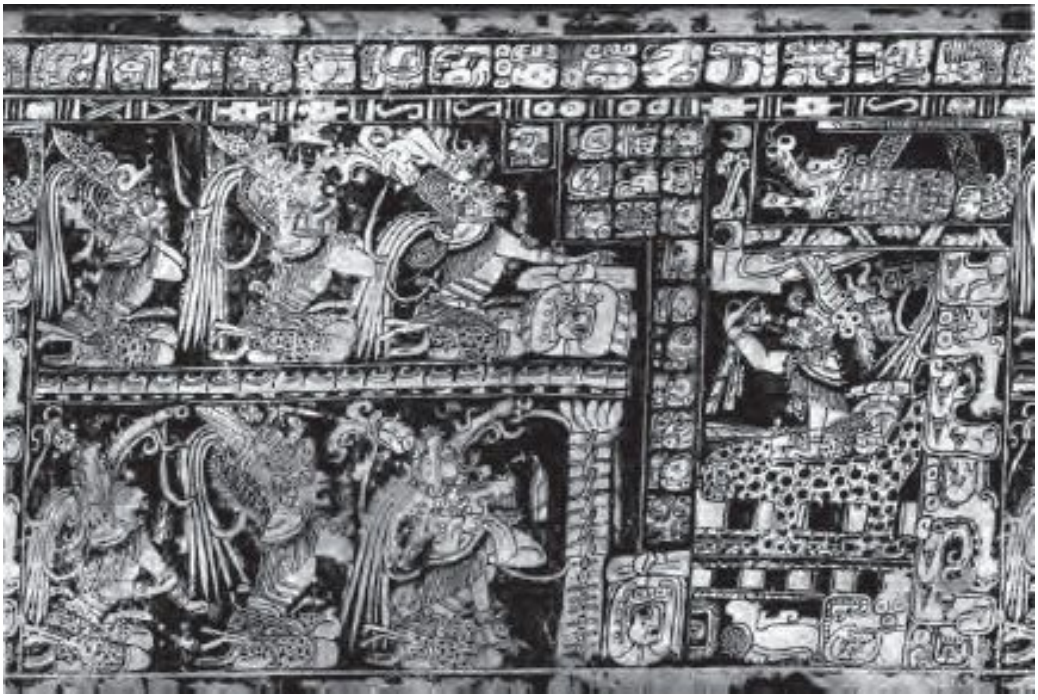
Another mystery is why no royal burial or sign of one has ever been found. While sacrifices of decapitated individuals have been found inside the pyramids, which have a number of tunnels—mostly filled in with rubble — there is no evidence that they were built as royal tombs, as one might expect.

If they were not royal tombs, as most archeologists believe pyramids were, then what was their purpose? Were they solely ceremonial centers? Or did they have some other purpose? Pyramids are found all over the world, from China, Egypt, Pacific Islands to North and South America. Many of these pyramids, like Teotihuacan, are associated with water and artificial lakes, such as the pyramids of Giza which once had a large lake known as Lake Moeris near them. This lake also had a pyramid in its center, much as Teotihuacan is thought to have had. La Venta was also built on an artificial island in the middle of a diverted river.

In my estimation, it is quite clear that the similarities between sites in the Olmec Heartland and the central Valley of Mexico are not coincidental.

It makes sense that the collapse of La Venta circa 400 BC would have hugely interrupted the hierarchical structure of the Olmec empire, and caused the Olmecs to scatter, and move in greater numbers to their already established outposts at sites such as Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan. This collapse may have been the end of the Fourth World told of by the Maya, who then emerged to prominence in Mesoamerica in the Fifth World. The influence of the Epi-Olmecs would have gradually declined, and areas may have revolted against them. Some of their cities were destroyed by further earth changes. The Olmecs, who had originally controlled the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and had influence much further afield, fell into obscurity until resurrected by archeologists.

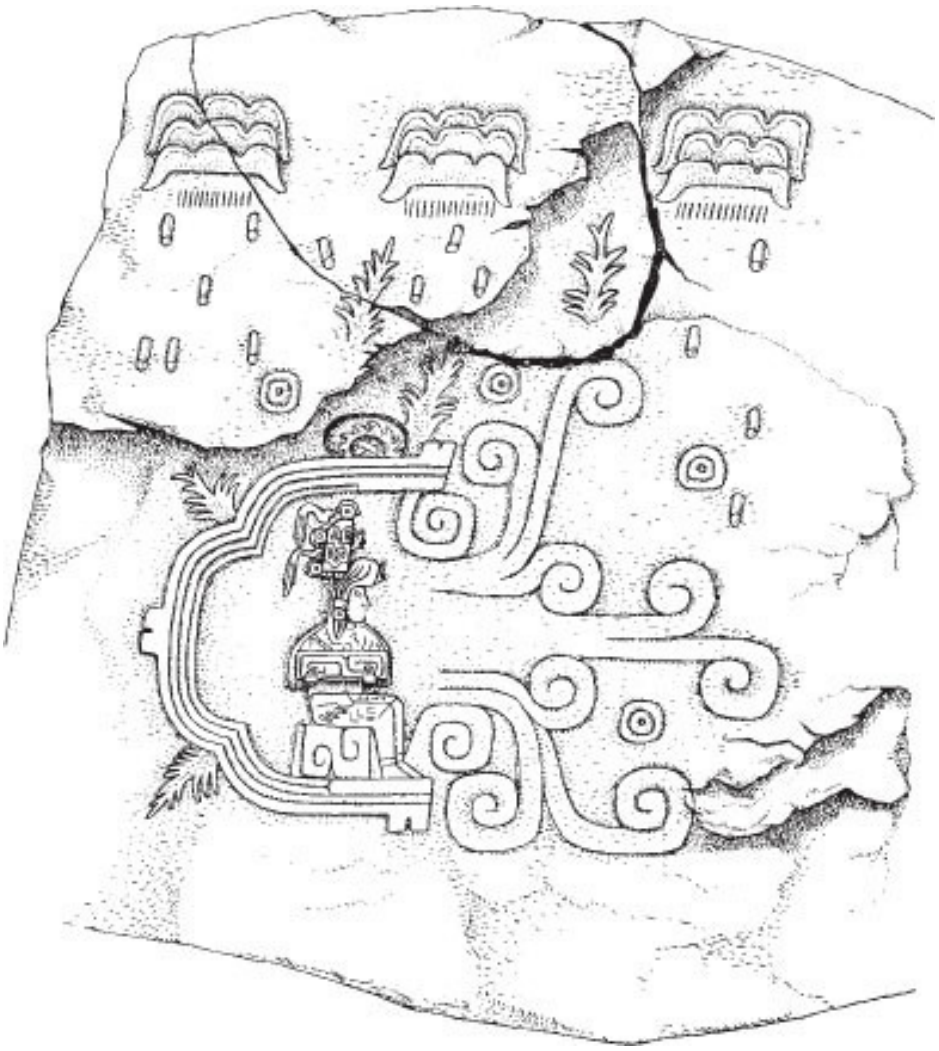
While we now have some understanding of the demise of the Olmecs, their true identity is still a puzzle, wrapped inside an enigma. Not until we look into their strange uses of quizuo and cranial deformation, and analyze their writing, will we get a glimpse of who the Olmecs really were.



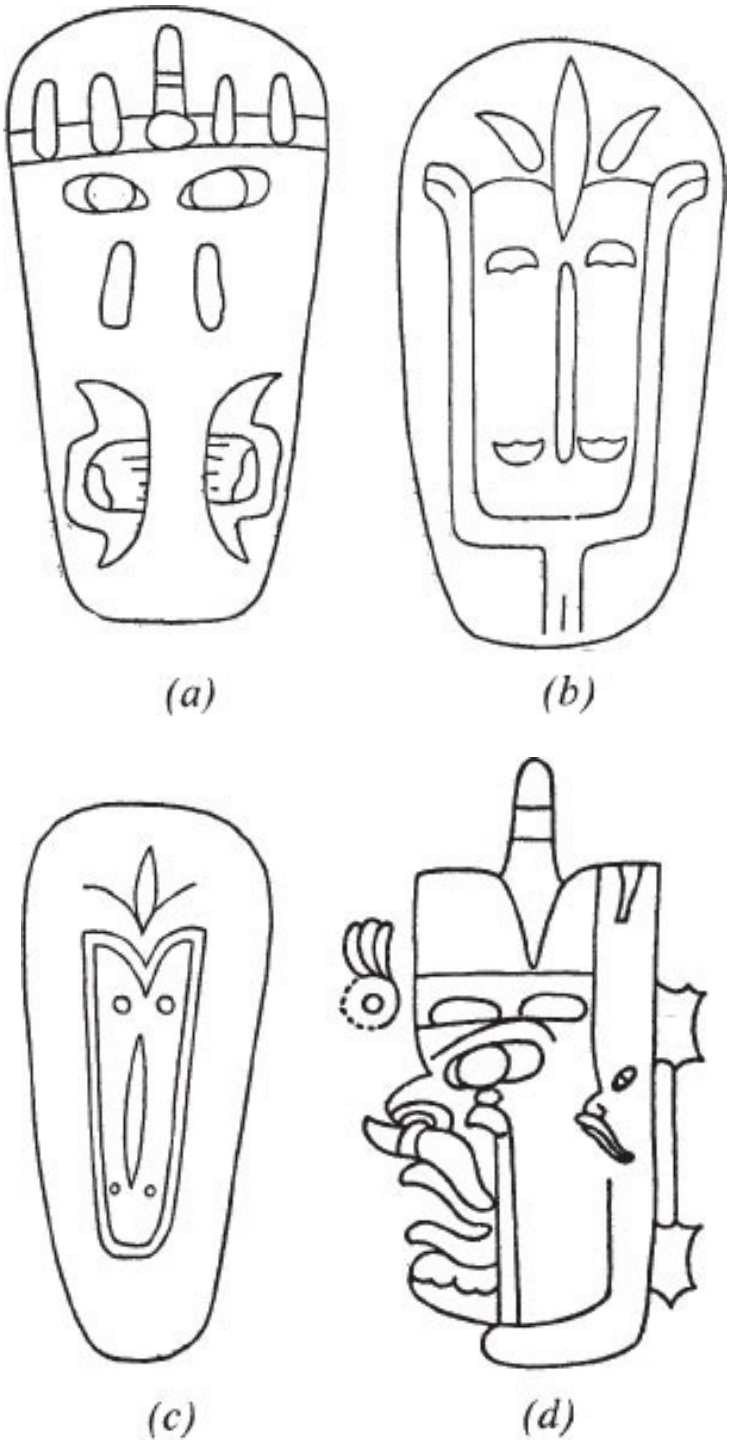
Mayan Vase of the Seven Gods (detail) from a private collection.

Early, wild maize on the left compared with modern maize.

Right: Stele from Cerro de la Piedra. Below: the Mayan glyph for Itzamna and the flood.



Olmec ruler sitting in a cave, a relief from Chalcatzingo.

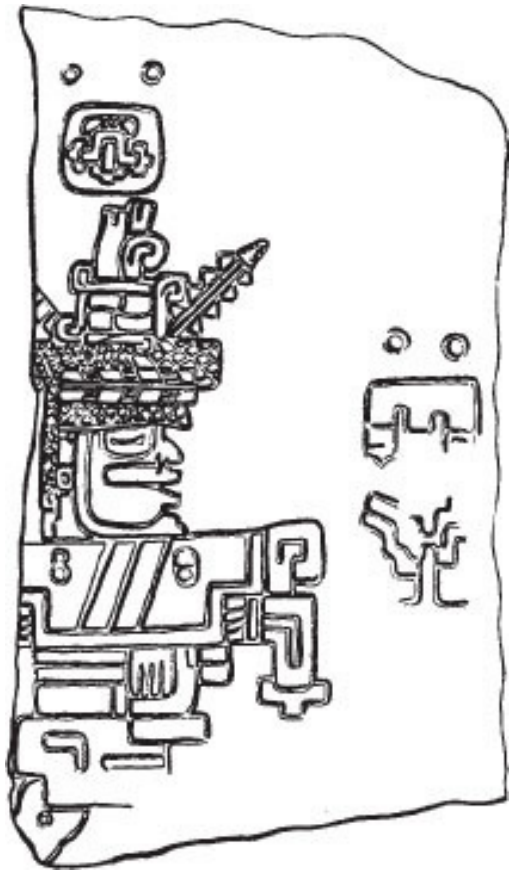


Carved celts from La Venta.

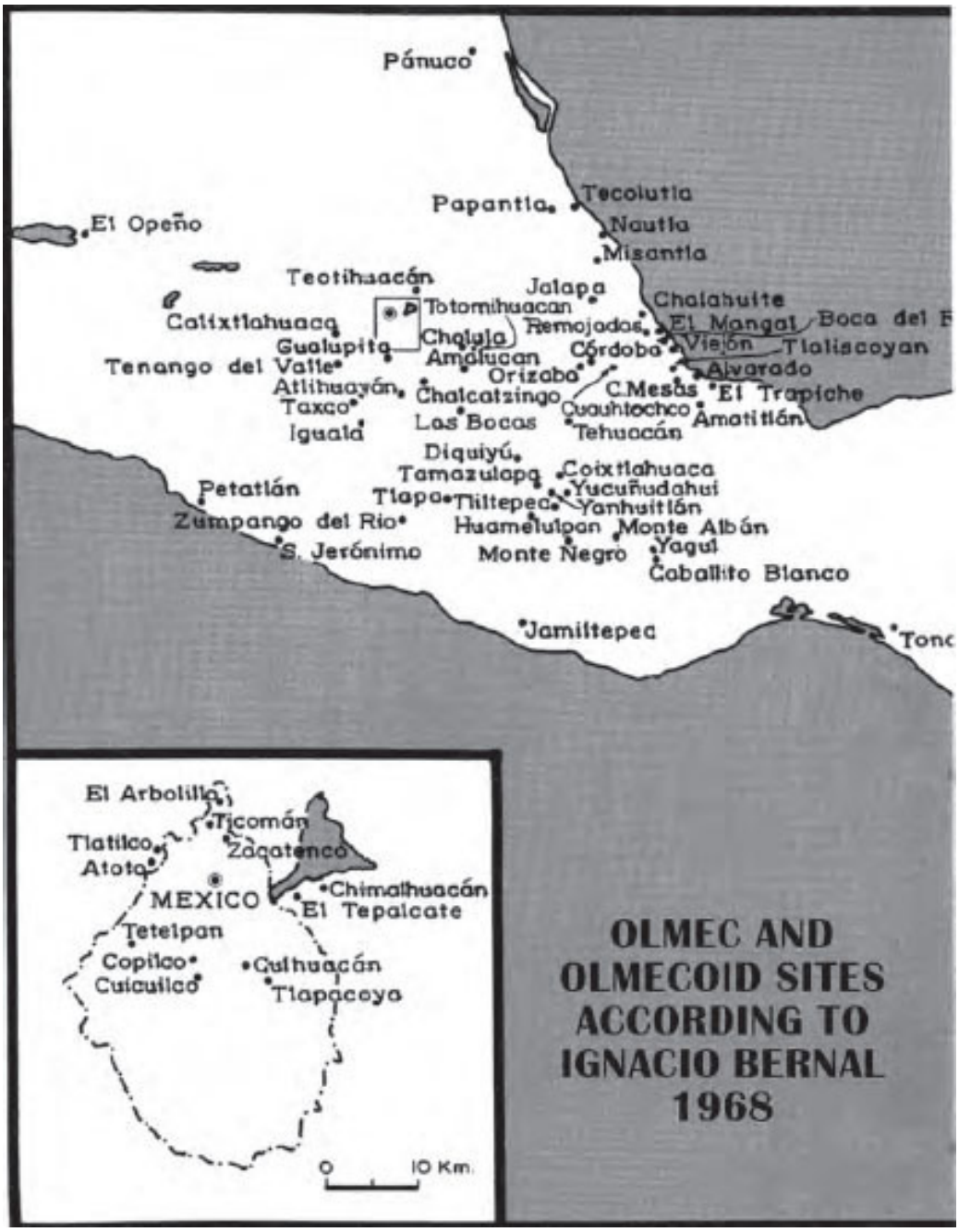
Mayan relief at Coba discovered by the German archeologist Teobert Mahler and taken to Berlin. Destroyed during WWII.

The excavation of the La Venta sarcophagus, 1945.

La Venta pectoral.



Right and Below: Olmec reliefs and writing discovered at Monte Alban.


Pánuco
Papantla
Tecolutla
Nautla
Misantla
El Opeño
Teotihuacán
Jalapa
Chalahuite
Totomihuacan
Remojados
El Mangal
Boca del R
Calixtlahuaca
Gualupita
Chalula
Amalucan
Córdoba
Viejón
Tlaliscoyan
Tenango del Valle
Orizaba
Alvarado
Atlihuayán
Chalcatzingo
C. Mesas
El Trapiche
Taxco
Las Bocas
Cuauhtochco
Amatitlán
Iguala
Tehuacán
Diquiyú
Tamazulapa
Coixtlahuaca
Petatlán
Tlapa
Tiltepec
Yucuñudahui
Yanhuitlán
Zumpango del Rio
Huamelulpan
Monte Albán
S. Jerónimo
Monte Negro
Yagul
Caballito Blanco
Jamiltepec
Tonc
El Arbolillo
Ticomán
Tlatilco
Zacatenco
Atoto
MEXICO
Chimalhuacán
El Tepalcate
Tetelpan
Copilco
Cuicuilco
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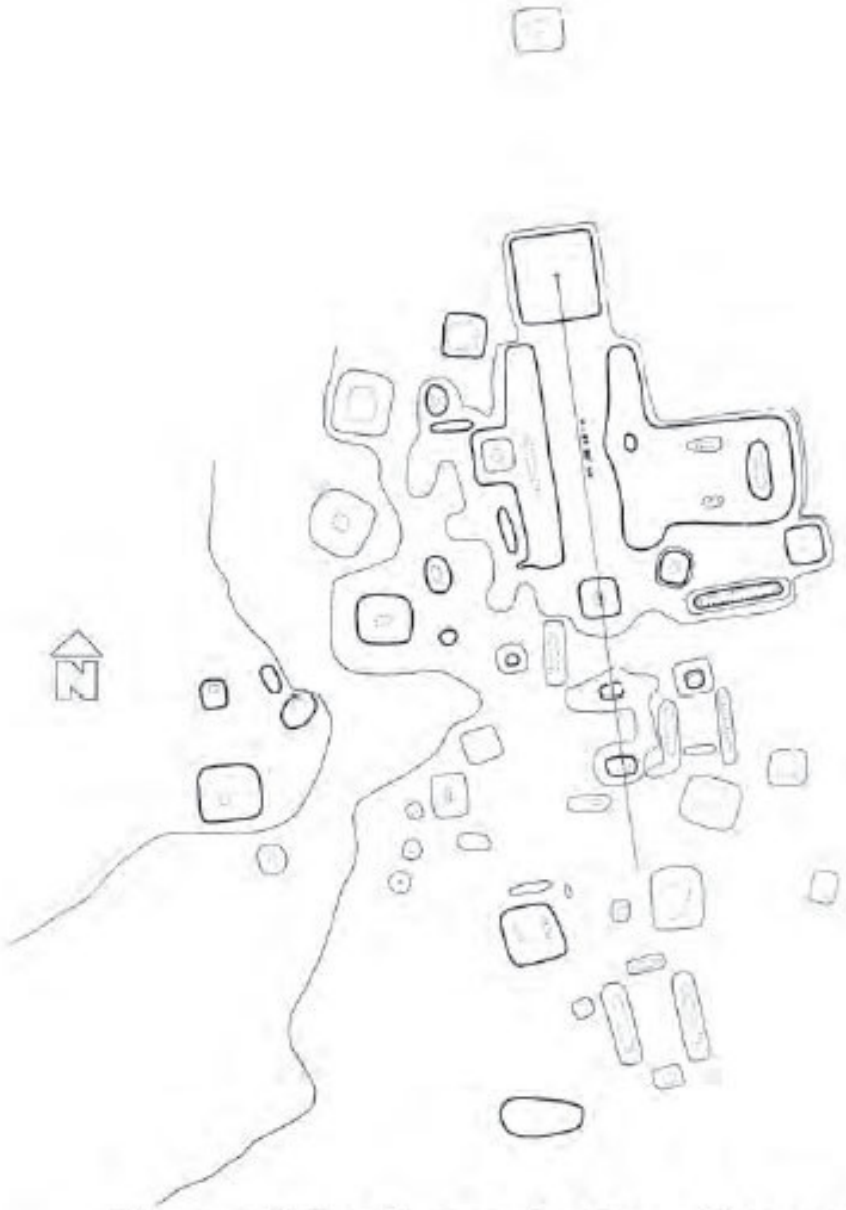
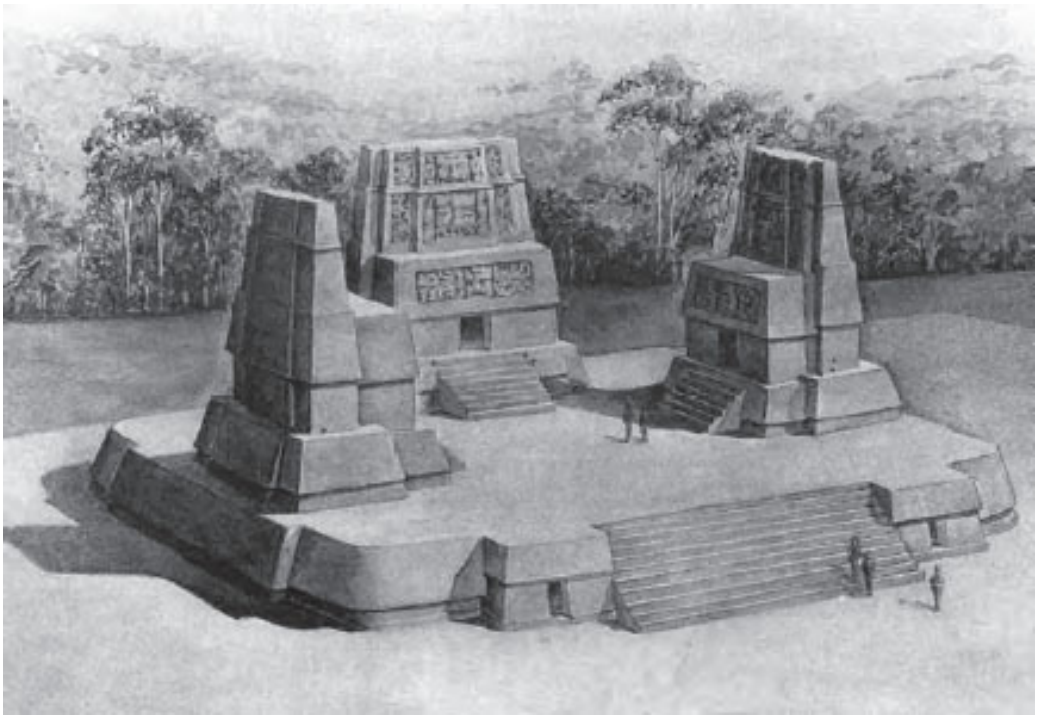
OLMEC AND
OLMECOID SITES
ACCORDING TO
IGNACIO BERNAL
1968

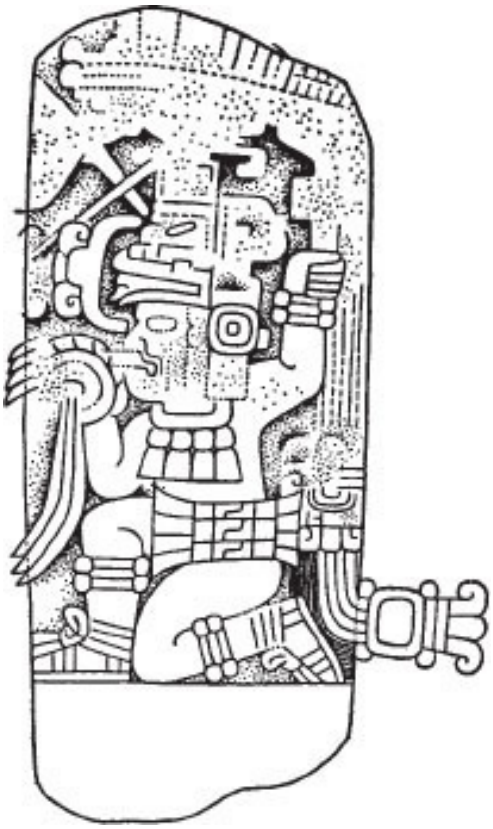
Piedras Negras on the Ucamacinta River. Originally an Olmec city?

Tikal, in the Peten jungles of Guatemala. Nearby Uaxactun was thought to be originally an Olmec city.



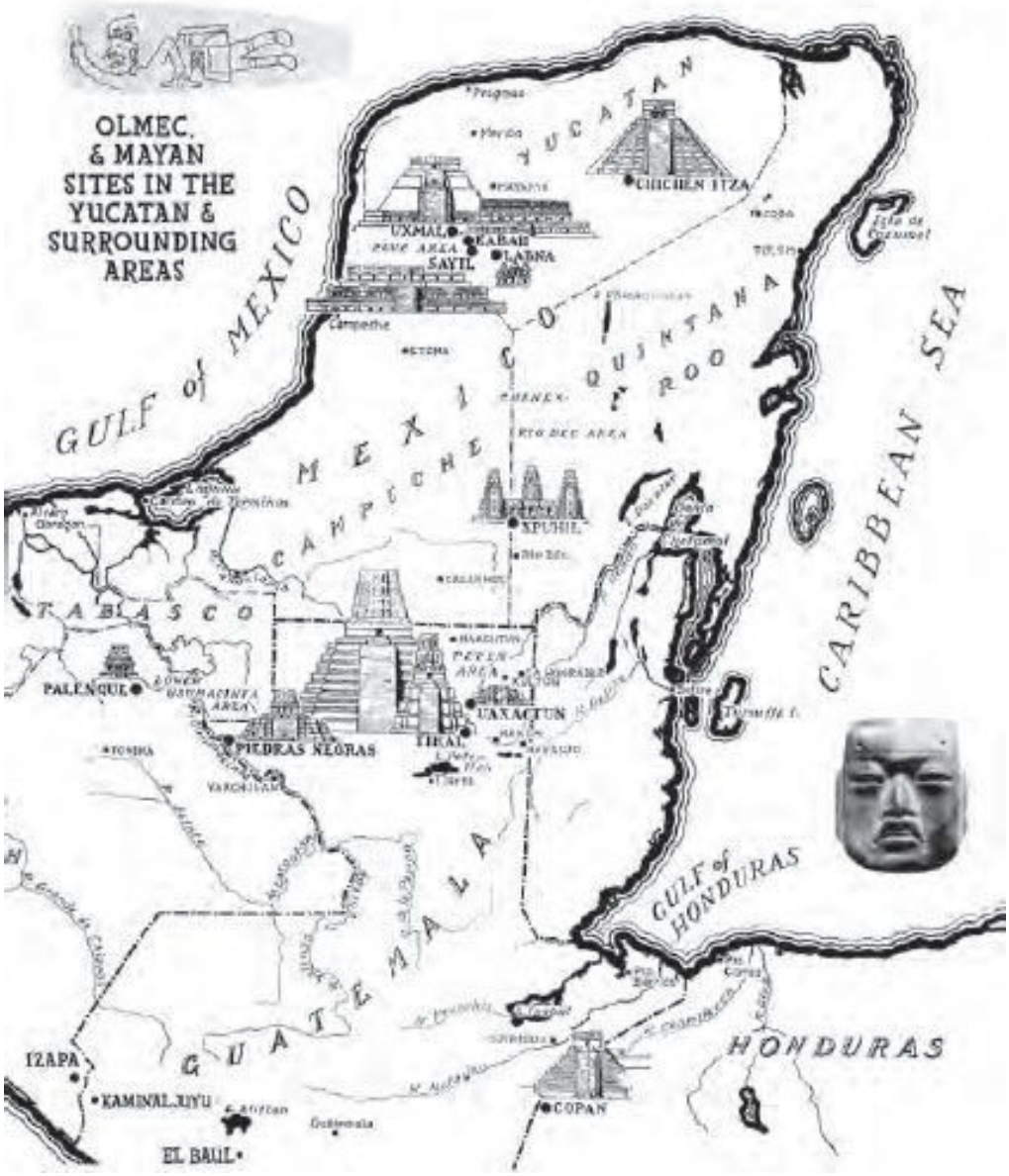
Map of Laguna de Los Cerros





Stele from Tres Zapotes.

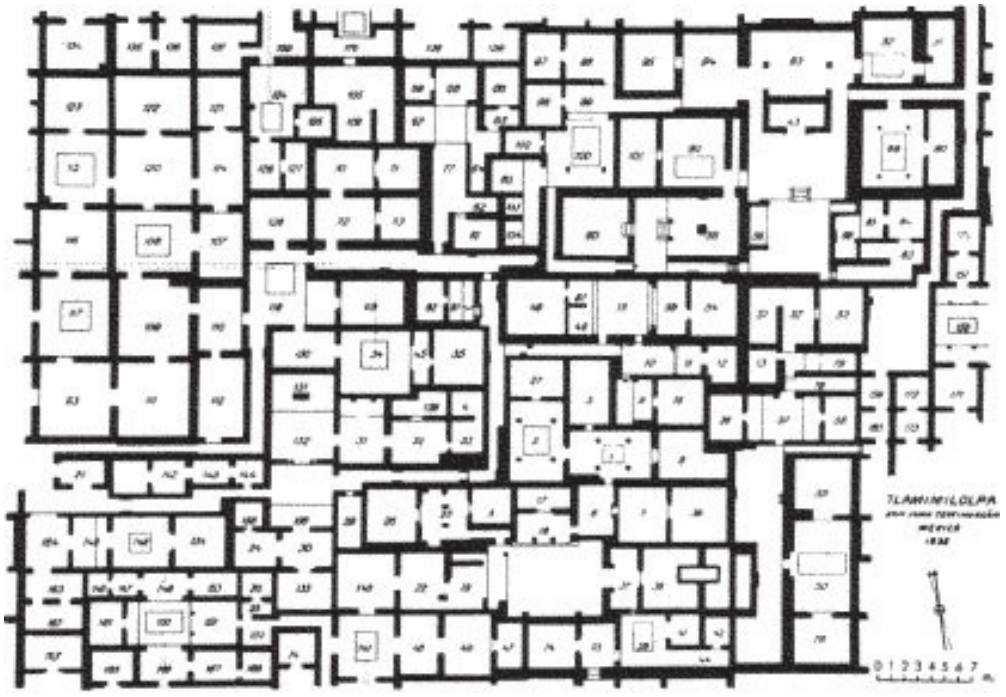
Olmec figurine from Uaxactun in the Peten jungles of Guatemala.


OLMEC, & MAYAN SITES IN THE YUCATAN & SURROUNDING AREAS
GULF of MEXICO
YUCATAN
CAMPECHE
QUINTANA ROO
CARIBBEAN SEA
TABASCO
CHICHEN ITZA
UXMAL
KABAH
LABNA
SAYIL
XPUHIL
PALENQUE
PIEDRAS NEGRAS
TIKAL
UAXACTUN
GUATEMALA
GULF of HONDURAS
HONDURAS
IZAPA
KAMINALJUYU
EL BALUL
COPAN

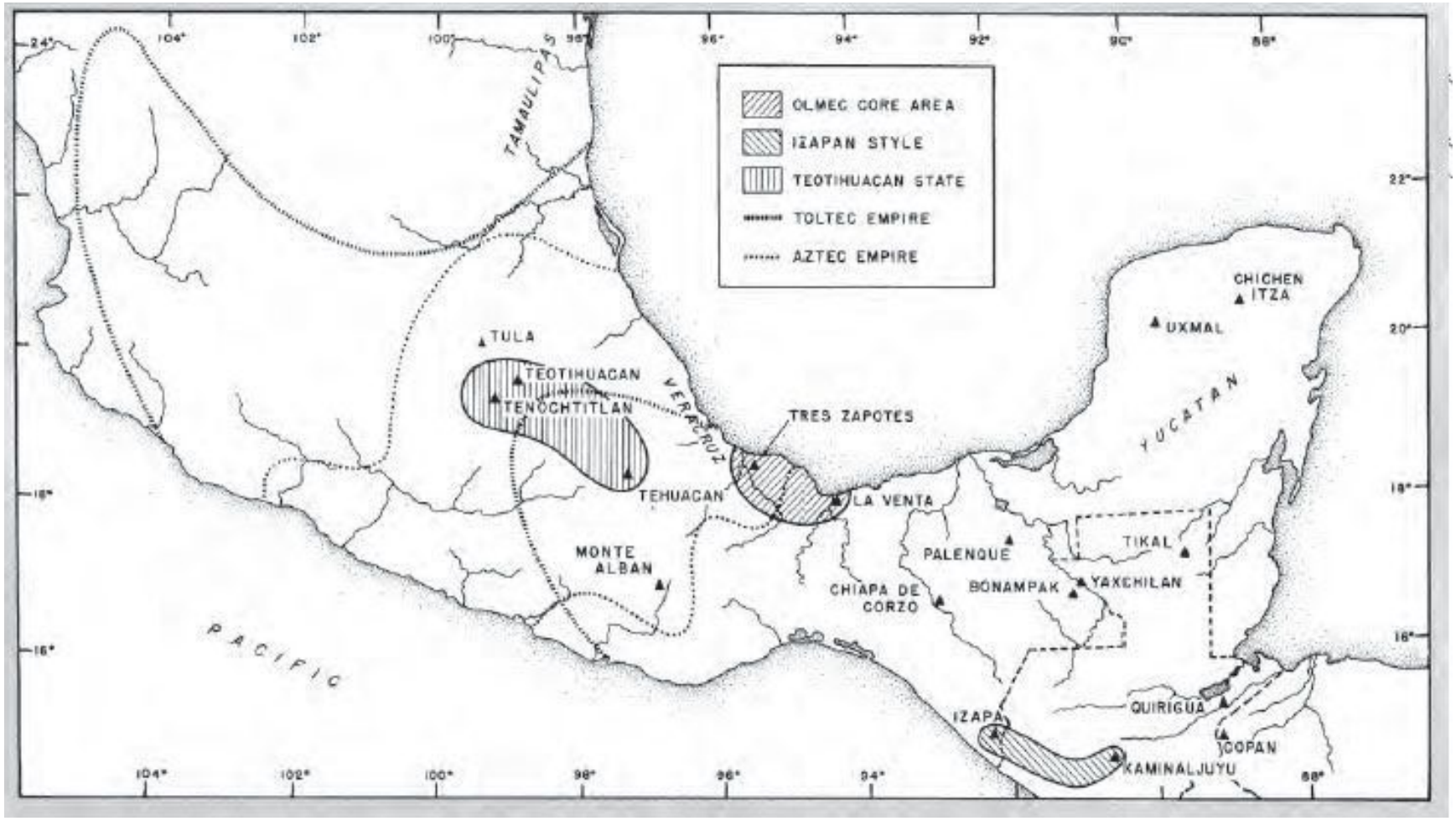
Top: Megalithic construction at Mone Alban. Bottom: Olmecs on slabs.

Top: Megalithic jaguar statue from Cuicuilco. Right: Lake Texcoco and the location of Cuilcuilco.

The circular pyramid of Cuicuilco, near Mexico City.


TLAMIMILOLPA
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Top: Teotihuacan. Bottom: Teotihuacan residential area.


OLMEC CORE AREA
IZAPAN STYLE
TEOTIHUACAN STATE
TOLTEC EMPIRE
AZTEC EMPIRE
TAMAULIPAS
VERACRUZ
YUCATAN
PACIFIC
TULA
TEOTIHUACAN
TENOCHTITLAN
TRES ZAPOTES
TEHUACAN
LA VENTA
MONTE ALBAN
CHIAPA DE CORZO
PALENQUE
BONAMPAK
TIKAL
YAXCHILAN
CHICHEN ITZA
UXMAL
IZAPA
QUIRIGUA
COPAN
KAMINALJUYU

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3.

THE MYSTERY OF QUIZUO

§§§

What clinches evidence of the African presence, however, are skulls and skeletons of Africans found on Olmec sites.
—Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, African Presence in Early America (1987)

Sticking Your Neck Out for Quizuo

The great debate within the archeological community concerning the Olmecs is whether there is any evidence of outside influence—transoceanic in nature—that can clearly be shown within the Olmecs culture. One shred of evidence presented by some academics is the curious use of the unusual kneeling posture known as quizuo.

One of the proponents of diffusionism within the traditional university system is Dr. Ivan Van Sertima of Rutgers University in New Jersey. Ivan Van Sertima was born in Kitty Village, Guyana, South America on January 26, 1935. He was educated at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University where he graduated with honors. According to his biography he served as a Press and Broadcasting Officer in the Guyana Information Services from 1957 to 1959. He came to the United States in 1970, where he completed his post graduate studies at Rutgers University. Dr. Van Sertima began his teaching career as an instructor at Rutgers in 1972, and he is now a Professor of African studies in the Department of Africana Studies and the editor of *The Journal of African Studies*.

Van Sertima actively promotes the diffusionist theory that ancient man crossed both the Atlantic and the Pacific in prolonged transoceanic contact. His books, *African Presence in Early America*, *African Presence in Early Asia*, and *They Came Before Columbus* are filled with articles and photos that show without a doubt that Negroes have lived, literally, all over the world, including the ancient Americas.

Van Sertima draws many parallels between Olmec statues and those from ancient Egypt, India, China, and Pacific Islands—parallels that he

maintains could not be coincidental. One feature of statures from these many parts of the world is the curious quizuo posture. Van Sertima, primarily a linguist although accomplished in other fields, is a major proponent of fellow archeologist Wayne B. Chandler's fascinating treatise on the carving of statues in the quizuo position being a worldwide custom.

Figurines when they are in the quizuo position are kneeling with their hands to their sides, on their knees or folded in front of them. The face is generally looking directly ahead, but it can be looking down, or slightly up. These distinct and oddball-posture statues, apparently depicting some sort of subjugation to a king, priest, or other authority, have been found in such far-flung places as Easter Island, China, Pakistan, Egypt and the many Olmec sites of Central America.

In his 1986 monograph *Trait-Influences in Meso-America: The African-Asian Connection*, included in Van Sertima's book *African Presence in Early America*, Wayne B. Chandler asserts that the quizuo posture was in use in Shang China circa 1300-1100 BC as seen in statues dating to that period. He also shows a jade Olmec figure in a quizuo posture that is from the Lima Ulua Valley in Honduras and dated to circa 1150 BC.

Chandler goes on to show that certain figurines from the Shang Dynasty (1600-1028 BC) were kneeling in a quizuo posture and sporting the hairstyle we call "mohawk." One famous statue from La Venta is identical, in a quizuo posture with a mohawk haircut. The similarity between these stones is quite astonishing.

Chandler says that this curious hairstyle, which was worn by the Olmecs, Columbians, Africans, Mohawk Indians of the St. Lawrence River as well as the Shang Chinese— and still seen in modern times—is associated with ancient Chinese magicians! Says Chandler:

> The presence of this hairstyle in Shang culture and then the Olmec denotes a strong and definite transmission of a trait characteristic. This style of cut was originally unique to the Shang and Olmec, but was later adopted by the Shang-influenced San Augustin culture of Columbia. This fact is evidenced in virtually all of their stone sculpture" The evidence indicates that this hairstyle was originally worn only by the shamen or magicians of the Shang and Olmec cultures, much in the way that dreadlocks were originally worn only by the high-priests or sadhu's of India.

The mystery of quizuo is an enduring one. Why do these people kneel in this curious posture with their hands on their knees?

This connection to the Shang Chinese magicians and the mohawk hairstyle lends further credence to the theory that the Olmecs were in part Shang Chinese admirals and ambassadors who in many cases were eunuchs. These specially trained eunuchs, who would have understood the concept of quizuo are dealt with in a later chapter.

Chandler notes that the Mohawk haircut is most usually associated with the quzuo posture, though most figures do not have such a hairstyle. Quizuo statues around the world are variously wearing turbans or leather hats, have elongated crania, have some special hairstyle, or are bald. Sometimes in Olmec statues there are hieroglyphs on the leather hats that may signify the identity or rank of the person.

A man with both hands flat on his knees is in a very subservient position. In a gesture comparable to shaking hands or waving an open hand, the person is showing that he is not holding a weapon. It is this curious position of utter helplessness that is so fascinating about the quizuo kneeling posture. The person “committing quizuo” was engaging in an act of utter helplessness and subservience, literally sticking his neck out to be either rewarded or punished. Indeed, the position is quite reminiscent of someone about to be either beheaded or beknighted. In point of fact, when the Queen of England takes up a sword to knight a kneeling person, she could just as easily cut his head off!

The ancient rite of quizuo is present in the famous story of Queen Elizabeth the First’s encounter with the privateer Francis (the “Dragon”) Drake upon his return from his famous trip around the world. The second admiral to officially circumnavigate the world (actually the first, since Magellan was killed in the Philippines), Drake was visited aboard his vessel the *Golden Hind* upon his return in 1581 by the Queen, who wanted him to answer for his raiding of Spanish colonies in South America. She commanded that he kneel in front of her as she took a sharp sword from its scabbard. After questioning the admiral, she raised the sword above her head as if to strike him with the blade and decapitate him. One wonders if Drake had his hands on his knees with his head down, ready for his fate. Queen Elizabeth gently brought the blade down upon Drake’s shoulders and pronounced him “Sir.”

When Christopher Columbus set out from Spain in 1492 he was a similarly knighted servant of the realm, who had kneeled in a quizuo position in front of Queen Isabella and been given permission to go out and “explore.”

How interesting that the quizuo position of kneeling and submission is not just an ancient tradition, but is something that reaches right up to modern times. When people like Paul McCartney, Mick Jagger and Richard Branson are turned into “Sirs” by Her Majesty, they must still adopt, briefly, the quizuo position.

It appears from the statuary that the quizuo position was not one for kings and emperors. It appears, rather, that it was a position for shamen, high-ranking dignitaries, ambassadors, generals, admirals and other servants of the realm. One possibility is that these figures represent an important servant or diplomat taking an oath of office. In that sense, it is both a posture of submission and of power!

It is curious that the quizuo position is associated with the Olmecs more than any other culture. Though statues in the quizuo posture have been found across the globe, they are mostly known because of the preponderance of them in Olmec settlements. Was the Land of Olman, spanning the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, like the Panama Canal of today, a land of international ambassadors, diplomats, admirals and sailors—a center for ports, markets, traders and wheeler-dealers? Was this the Olman of old?

Statues in the quizuo position can be found at such diverse places as: Egypt; Easter Island; Mohenjo Daro (India); China; Tiahuanaco; Mesoamerica and many other areas. Once the quizuo posture is more widely known among archeologists and historians, will they recognize it as evidence of a practice uniting cultures worldwide?

Olmec Connections to Africa

Van Sertima points out that the use by the Olmecs of jade nose plugs, tattoos and special facial adornment, odd hairstyles and special gestures are further proof that the culture was influenced by and shared with others.

Vis a vis African influence Van Sertima says in *They Came Before Columbus:*

> The destruction of African high-cultures after the massive and continuous invasions of Europe left many Africans surviving on the periphery or outer ring of what constituted the best in African civilizations. New facts that challenge this image create such consternation and incredulity that an extraordinarily emotional campaign is mounted by some of the most respected voices in the scientific establishment to explain away the new data.
>
> That drift of dynastic Egypt from Africa has now dramatically slowed. Recent archeological finds have caught up with the mythmakers. More and more the history of Africa is being reconstructed upon the basis of hard, objective data rather than upon the self-serving speculations and racist theories about the black barbarians.
>
> … The Indians of this Espanola said there had come to Espanola a black people who have the tops of their spears made of a metal which they called gua-nin, of which he [Columbus] had sent samples to the Sovereigns to have them assayed, when it was found that of 32 parts, 18

were of gold, 6 of silver and 8 of copper. The origin of the word guanin may be tracked down in the Mande languages of West Africa, through Mandigo, Kabunga, Toronka, Kankanka, Banbara, Mande and Vei. In Vei, we have the form of the word ka-ni which, transliterated into native phonetics, would give us gua-nin.

Van Sertima, who is an expert in African languages, shows numerous instances where the names, cultures and rituals of the Africans coincided with those of the ancient Americans. Important to Olmec studies is his assertion that the Bambara werewolf cult whose head is known as *amantigi* (head of faith) appeared in Mexican rituals as *amanteca.* The ceremonies accompanying these rituals, Van Sertima says, are too identical to have been independently evolved among peoples who have had no previous encounter. The term "talking devil" is called *Hore* in Mandigo, and *Haure* in Carib, he gives as an example. In the Aztec-Mixtec language of Nahuatl, a waistcloth is called *maxtli;* in the African dialect it of Malinke the same waistcloth is called *masiti.* The female loincloth is *nagua* in Mexico; it is *nagba* in the West African dialect of Mande.

Says Van Sertima:

> … The Malinke words meaning to smoke are *dyamba* and *dyemba.* These can account for South American smoke words such as the Guipinavi, *dema;* Traiana, *iema;* Maypures, *jema;* Guahiba, *sema;* Caberi, *scema;* Baniva, *djeema;* and so on. The Mandigo word *duli* (to smoke) which also occurs in the same form in Toma and Bambara, and in its variant forms *nduli* and *luli* in Mende, can be found among the American languages Carib, Arawak, Chavantes, Baniva, Acroamirin, and Goajira. The African word for banana runs right through these American languages…

Van Sertima mentions that early explorers occasionally encountered villages with populations comprised entirely of blacks:

> In 1513 Vasco Nunez de Balboa, another Spanish usurper came upon a group of African war captives in an Indian settlement. He was told that the blacks lived nearby and were constantly waging wars. A priest, Fray Gregoria Garcia wrote an account of another encounter in a book that was silenced by the Inquisition: "Here we found slaves of the lord—Negroes—who were the first our people saw in the Indies."

Van Sertima is a respected member of the academic community, so the isolationists are forced to respond to his theories, but they essentially dismiss him in a few sentences, and never really counter his claims. The widespread use of quizuo, including by the Olmecs, is simply ignored. Van Sertima is called an “afrocentrist” by his critics, who assert that he wrongly believes that all culture, including that of Mexico, stems from Africa. While this is not his message, it serves to trivialize his careful research.

Modern archeology, dominated by the “isolationist” theories that say that oceans are barriers, not highways, has had a tough time dealing with Negroid and other features that obviously are different from our traditionalal image of the American Indian. One way that archeologists dealt with this was to simply suggest that these weren’t really Negroid features at all, but merely stylized images of the Siberian hunters that created all the tribes of the Amazon, the Andes, Central and North America.

Another tack was to admit that these were Negroid features, but to assert that Negroes must also have migrated across the Bering land bridge during the last ice age. This mainstream argument for Negroes having come across the Straits with other Siberian hunters circa 12,000 years ago is summed up in the book *The Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico*, by the British archeologist Nigel Davies, a critic of theories of ancient seafaring. Davies flatly rejects any theories of Phoenicians, Egyptians, Chinese, Vikings, Africans or anyone else ever reaching Mexico by boat. Yet, unlike some historians, he readily admits that Olmecs are Negroes. His explanations of Negroid Olmecs in Mexico is interesting.

In the book (pages 26-27) Davies says:

> Insofar as Negroid features are depicted in pre-Columbian art, a more logical explanation surely exists that does not depend upon flights of fancy involving African seafarers. Negroid peoples of many kinds are to be found in Asia as well as Africa, and there is no reason why at least a few of them should not have joined those migrant bands who came across the Bering land bridge that joined north-east Asia and north-west America for so many millennia.
>
> Small men with Negroid features were the aboriginal inhabitants of many lands facing the Indian Ocean, including India itself, the Malay Peninsula and also the Philippines, where they still exist today. One need go no further than Manila International Airport to find proof of their

existence. Nearby stands the Museum of Philippine Traditional Cultures; facing the entrance is a wall covered with photographs of ‘unfamiliar faces’. In marked contrast to the typical Mongoloid Filipinos of today, many of these are dark-skinned aboriginals, known as ‘Negritos’, who now live scattered along the east side of the main island of Luzon; they mostly have thick lips and black skins. The Weddas of Ceylon are another of these Negroid aboriginal groups. It is therefore not in the least surprising that such elements should have joined the ranks of those early migrants who crossed the Bering bridge before it sank beneath the waves; their presence offers a more logical explanation of Negroid features than any other.

Therefore, even if one accepts the uncertain premise that Olmec art is based on the portrayal of true Negroids, this does not warrant the conclusion that such people were Africans. It is perfectly possible to find individuals in Tabasco today who have faces not unlike those of the colossal heads, whose features also somewhat recall the large stone carvings of the Cham culture of Cambodia, another country that still has a Negroid aboriginal population.

While this argument is not unreasonable on its face— maybe some people of all colors did wander about the continents in ancient days—it is far from convincing that colonization was not effected (from either direction) by sea.

Davies point that it is “perfectly possible to find individuals in Tabasco today who have faces not unlike those of the colossal heads…” is really here nor there. If Negroids had colonized Tabasco by land or by sea, then it would be only normal that they would have married and had children—children who of course looked like them, as did their ancestors.

Why does it seem impossible to mainstream archeologists that ancient people would have traveled anywhere by boat? How does Davies suppose that Negroes got to the Philippine Islands? How Negroes, who presumably all stem from Africa, are populating such remote western Pacific islands as New Guinea, the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and Fiji is very much a mystery of history.

Does Davies suppose that the myriad islands of the Pacific were populated by people walking across ancient land bridges? While these ‘experts’ are forced to admit that Polynesians and Micronesians colonized

remote islands in the Pacific, many of them tiny dots of land thousands of miles from anywhere, they cannot admit that seafarers in ancient times could similarly find such huge continents as North and South America! In the same vein, it is accepted that Madagascar was colonized by Malaysians traveling the entire length of the Indian Ocean to a remote corner of southeast Africa, yet it is denied that ancient seafarers with sophisticated navies such as the Chinese, Egyptians, Hindus or Phoenicians could have duplicated such a feat!

In order to sidestep such issues, a new tack has been taken by current isolationist archeologists: labeling anyone who suggests transoceanic traffic across the Atlantic or Pacific as a “racist” of one sort or another. This has been used successfully by the Mayan academics who maintain that it is a racist notion to suggest that Central Americans could not create their own culture and were influenced in various ways by other cultures.

Yet is it not racist to maintain that other cultures were not capable of building boats and crossing oceans just as Europeans were to do thousands of years later? Try telling an African-American history professor who believes in transoceanic traffic that he is a “racist” because he believes that Africans once traveled across the Atlantic and created an empire in Central America!

The puzzle has been put forth to all archeologists to explain: Why do many of the Olmec figures look so much like Africans? How can figures that look so obviously African not actually be connected to Africa? Archeologists like Van Sertima say that the Olmecs look African because they are African. The isolationists must look elsewhere, and their explanation is that some American Indians look like Africans because certain genetic traits mysteriously became preponderant. Any similarities of the Olmecs to Africans or Negroids coming via Asia and the Pacific (for example, from the Melanesian Islands, the Andaman Islands, etc.) is purely coincidental. Quizuo is coincidental as well, and though it is a worldwide cultural phenomenon, statues found in this posture are not necessarily connected. Quizuo, in fact, is best ignored by the mainstream academics, as no study of it is likely to help the isolationist point of view.

When one begins to accept that the Olmecs were part of some sort of sophisticated transoceanic naval empire, a time when the world was being explored by great navies— when the ancient sea kings ruled the earth—one

can begin to accept that the posture of quizuo was part of this ancient network. Also part of it was the strange custom of cranial deformation. But first we must discuss transoceanic contacts with the Olmecs in greater detail.

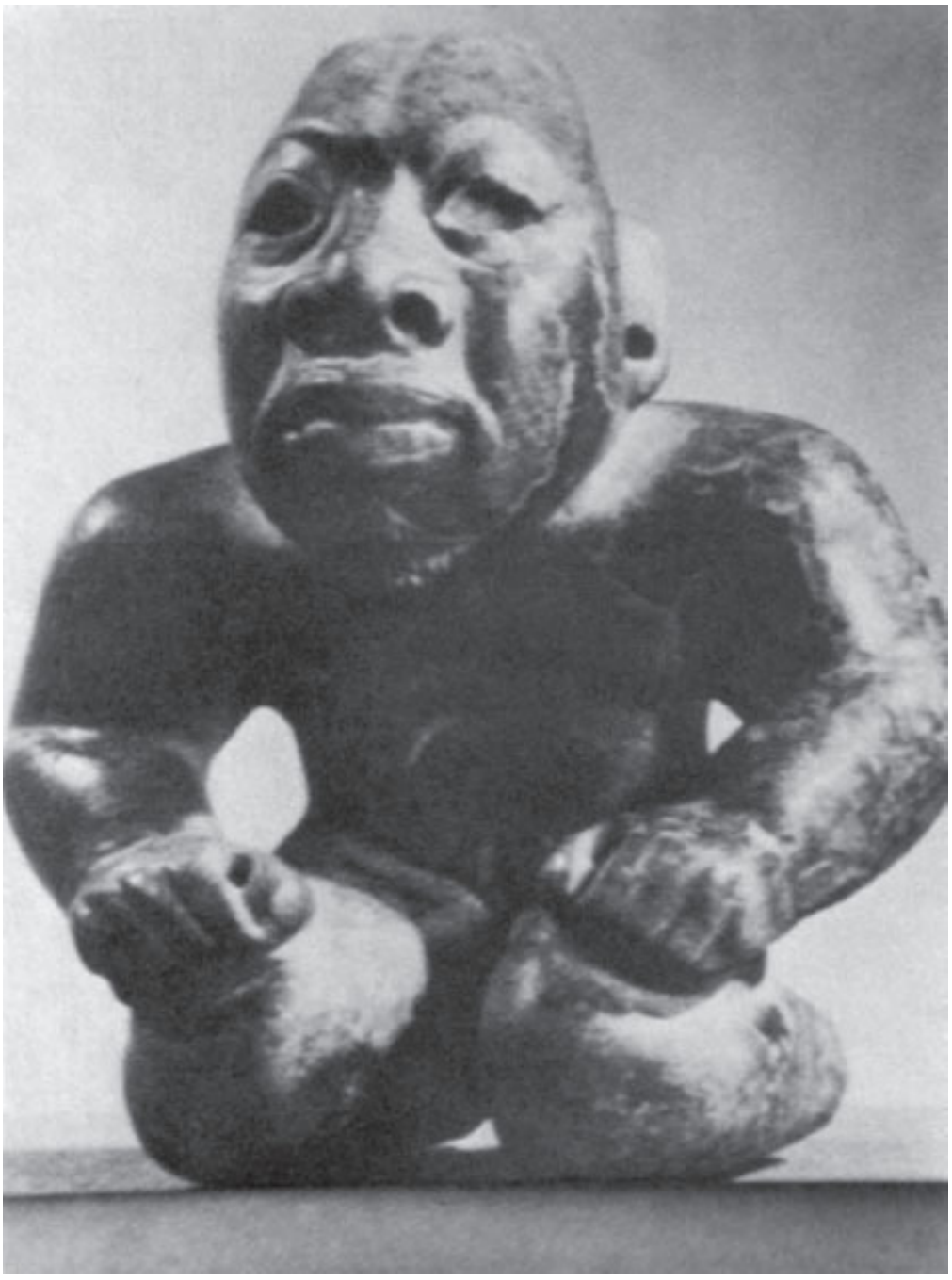
Chart of Olmec figurines from Comacalco.

Shang Chinese statue in quizuo position.

Olmec statue with mohawk haircut in quizuo position.

Shang statue with mohawk haircut in quizuo position.

Olmec statue in quizuo position.



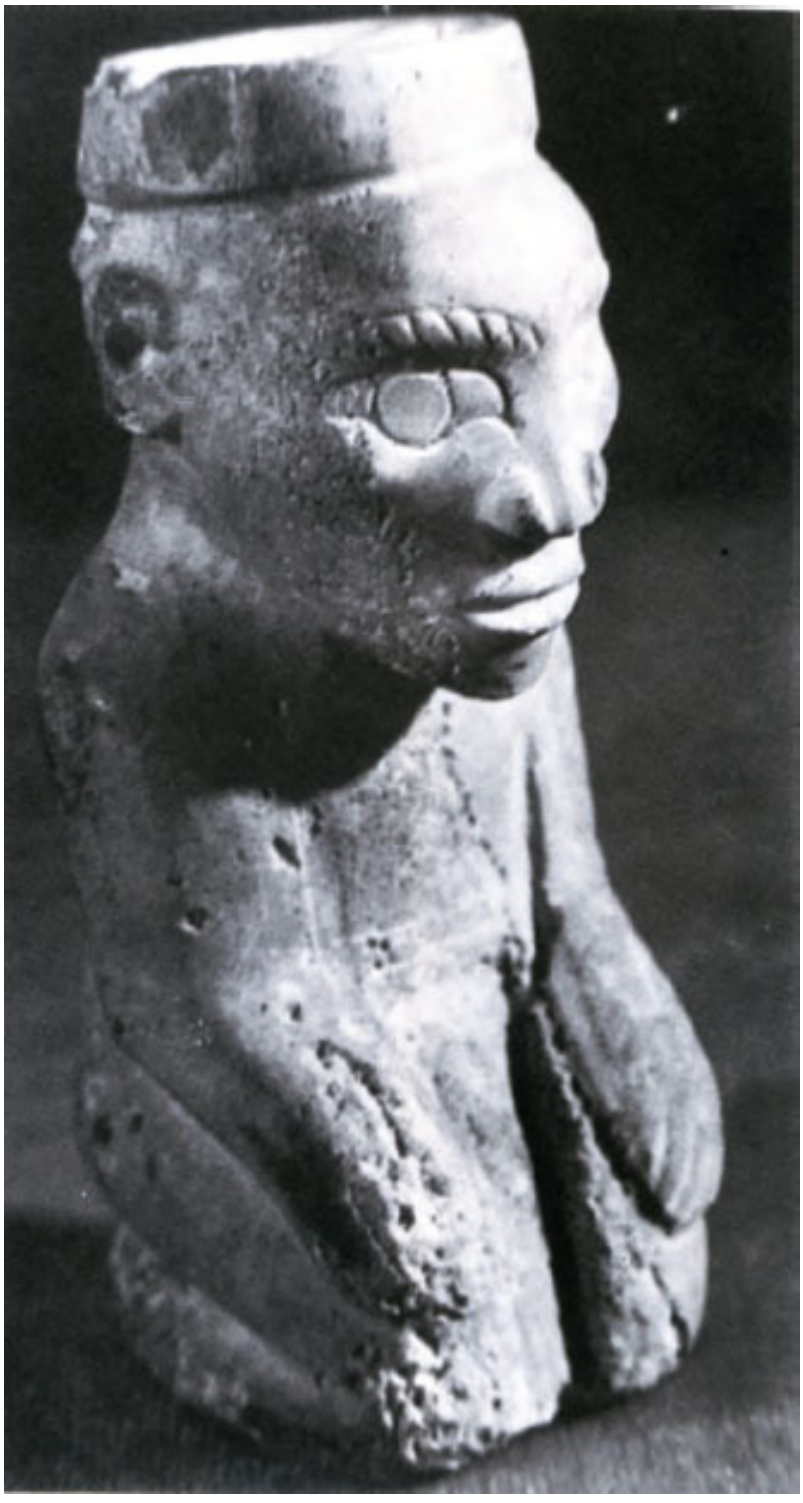
Olmec statue from Nicaragua in quizuo position.

Egyptian statue in quizuo position.

Easter Island statue in quizuo position.

Olmec statue in quizuo position.

Egyptian scribe statue in quizuo position.



Shang Chinese statue in quizuo position, circa 1300 BC.

Olmec statue in quizuo position.

Shang feline statue in quizuo position.

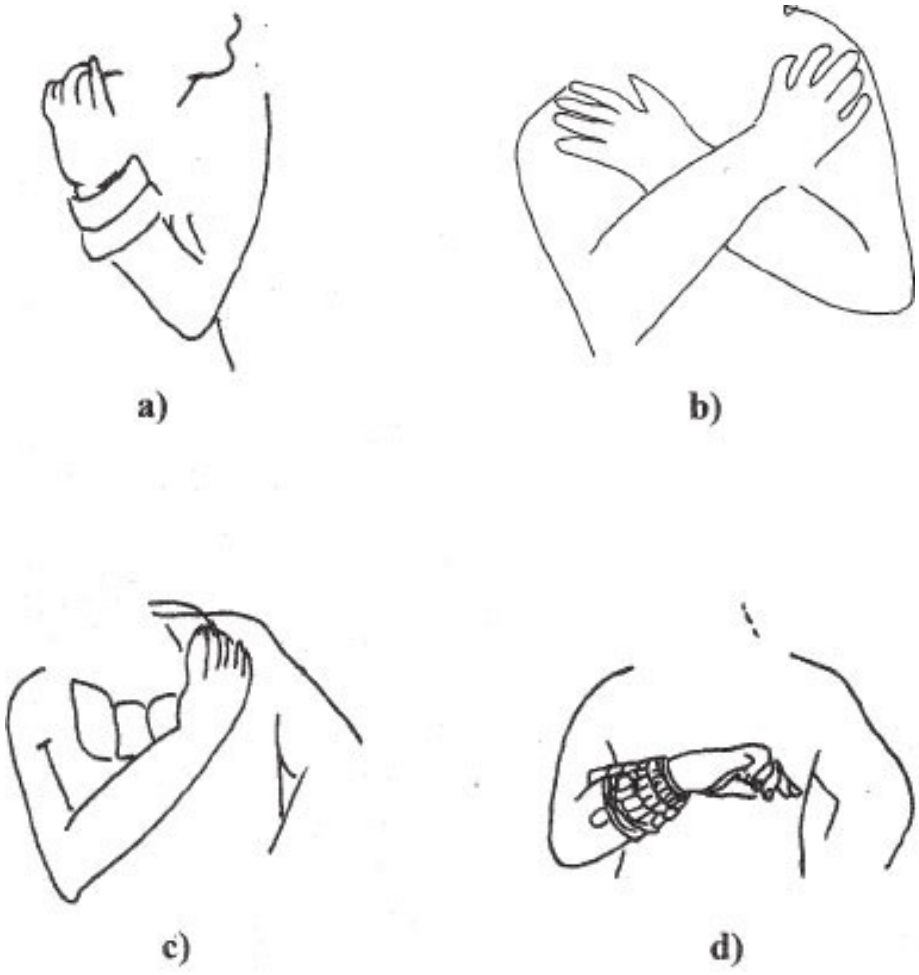
Statues in the quizuo position at Teohuanaco, Bolivia.

Olmec figurine holding a baby in the “protection” gesture.

San Augustine, Columbia, statue holding a baby in the “protection” gesture.

A late classic Maya statue in a seated position.

Chinese Bodhisattva statue in a seated position.



Different gestures and arm movements found on Mayan statues.

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4.

THE MYSTERY OF TRANSOCEANIC TRADE

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The startling fact is that in all parts of Mexico, from Campeche in the east to the South coast of Guerrero, and from Chiapas, next to the Guatemalan border, to the Panuco River in the Huasteca region (north of Veracruz), archeological pieces representing Negro or Negroid people have been found, especially in Archaic or pre-Classic sites.
—Alexander von Wuthenau,
Unexpected Faces in Ancient America (1986)

The Mystery of Transoceanic Trade

As we are starting to see, if we keep to the narrow-minded view that the Olmecs were isolated from other Mesoamerican cultures, and isolated from transoceanic contact, we will never solve the many mysteries concerning them. But, by looking into the possibilities and evidence for transoceanic contact—both trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific—we may unravel the enigma that is the Olmecs.

To unravel part of the mystery of trans-Atlantic trade, let us look at the ancient city of Comalcalco, the western-most Mayan site known in Mexico. While several Mayan sites are located on the Yucatan Peninsula which guts out into the Gulf of Mexico, east of the mainland, Comalcalco lies near the mainland coast of the Gulf of Mexico, only a few miles west of the delta of the Usumacinta River This important river leads into the Mayan cities located deep in the Petén area of Guatemala.

Comalcalco was a major Mayan port city that flourished between 700 and 900 AD. Like most Mayan sites, it is no doubt much older than this Classic Mayan period, and with the recent discoveries at Nakbe in the Petén, it may go back to 1000 BC or earlier. Comalcalco, like many other Mayan cities, is thought to have been originally occupied by the Olmecs. Port cities are often washed away in hurricanes, and Comalcalco may have

been rebuilt many times over hundreds, even thousands, of years. Comalcalco was still a flourishing Mayan port at the time of the Spanish Conquest, but fell into decay soon afterward.

Comalcalco is unusual for two reasons. The first is that since there are no stones in the area for building, Comalcalco was built out of mud bricks. The Maya raised huge structures of brick at the city, unique in the Mayan world.

The other aspect of Comalcalco that makes it rather unique is that many of these bricks have inscriptions on them. In 1977 and 1978, the National Institute of Anthropology and History excavated the site and found that it was entirely made of baked bricks. It was discovered that approximately three percent of the bricks which make up the site bore inscriptions.

In a study done by the Mexican archaeologist Neil Steede for the National Institute of Anthropology and History it was discovered that 3671 bricks had inscriptions on them. Of these bricks, 2129 or 58 percent had Maya hieroglyphs on them. Old World inscriptions appeared on 499 of the bricks (or 13.6 percent) in languages such as Arabic, Phoenician, Libyan, Egyptian, Ogam, Tifinag, Chinese, Burmese and Paliburmese. Actually, 640 bricks or 17.3 percent had Old World inscriptions on them, but if any brick had Mayan hieroglyphs on them with notes in Old World inscriptions, they were placed in the Mayan brick category. Other bricks had drawings on them (735 bricks or 20 percent) and 308 bricks were mixed or unknown (8.4 percent).

According to Steede, a complete set of the photographs of the bricks was taken to the Epigraphic Society in San Diego, California where they were examined by linguists. It was here that the above-mentioned languages were identified. Some of the bricks even had inscriptions of elephants on them. As noted above, several bricks had Mayan inscriptions mixed with other languages, typically translations.

Dr. Barry Fell of the Epigraphic Society felt that the bricks were part of a language school at Comalcalco where students, studying various languages, drew on wet bricks. Afterwards the bricks were used for the construction of buildings. The bricks with inscriptions were discovered by Mexican archaeologists as simple construction bricks and the inscriptions or drawings were not placed in such a way as to be visible. They were only

discovered in the dismantling of structures during the government's archaeological excavations.

Steede makes a good point when he says that there is a problem with the dating as the languages present in the bricks are from a period of approximately AD 0 to 400 while Comalcalco is generally ascribed to dates of AD 700 to 900. Steele points out the possibility that these bricks might have been taken from an earlier structure and used in the construction of the present building!

Steede suggests that since only one half of one percent of the bricks have been looked at so far, there is the possibility of there being more than one million inscribed bricks still awaiting excavation at Comalcalco. Steede has something very interesting to say about the currently accepted Mayan dating correlation:

> …the dates seem to be clustered around the accepted classic Maya period (that is from A.D. 700-900). This would strongly suggest that our correlation of the Maya calendar is off by some 300-400 years. Correlation for the present correlation was done basically by Thompson. The Goodman-Martinez-Thompson (GMT) correlation used three basic factors as signs of the entrance of the classic period. These factors were the arch, polychrome pottery and Carbon 14 dates. All three have been pushed back by some 300 years since the establishment of the present correlation, but we have not changed the correlation itself. We have very strong indications at Comalcalco to do so. It would tentatively seem as though the Spinden correlation, which sets all dates some 260 years earlier, would be more meaningful.

Steele goes on to say that so far linguists are in agreement that the bricks at Comalcalco show a variety of foreign languages, while archaeologists are in disagreement, simply because what the linguists say "just cannot be correct." This, I dare say, is not a very scientific argument on the archaeologists' part.

I would also like to remind the reader that the ruins of Comalcalco and the discovery of the inscribed bricks has been done by a highly respected group: The National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico. However, the entrenched dogma of the current isolationists does not change easily. Most likely, the discoveries at Comalcalco will be suppressed as

much as possible by the academics, and it will be the rare student of archaeology at any university who even hears about the controversy over the Comalcalco bricks.

Egyptians and the Trans-Pacific Trade

In his 1923 book *The Children of the Sun*, University of Manchester archeologist W. J. Perry attempted to demonstrate how a dual system of Egyptians and Hindu Indians ventured out into the Pacific and colonized such places as Tonga, Tahiti, Hawaii and Easter Island. Perry presented evidence that envoys of the ancient Sun Kingdoms of Egypt and India traveled into Indonesia and the Pacific circa 1500 BC, spreading their sophisticated culture. Perry traces the expansion of megalithic building from its origin in Egypt through Indonesia and across the Pacific all the way to the Americas. These early mariners searched for gold, obsidian, and pearls in their incredible explorations from island to island—Perry says they were known as the Children of the Sun!

One theory holds that the Biblical story of the land of Ophir may be referring to trans-Pacific contact. According to the Bible, circa 1000 BC, King Solomon's Phoenician ships made a three-year trip to a land of gold called Ophir. The theory, boldly stated is this: by 4000 BC and probably much earlier, the Egyptians were sailing across the Indian Ocean to Sumatra, Australia and New Guinea. They mined gold and traded with Indonesians, explored Australia and exploited its vast resources as best they could. They continued across the Pacific in a joint Hindu-Egyptian colonization and commercialization of the Pacific, and ultimately traded with the advanced cultures of North and South America. King Solomon's ships followed these established trade routes in order to bring back the treasures described in the Bible.

Lapita pottery that is found throughout the Solomons, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and as far as Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, is only dated to 4,000 years before present. Still, the obvious network of trade, mining and commerce of 2,000 BC may well be connected with Egyptian traders and their far-flung voyages to the distant land they called Punt. It is believed by historians such as Harvard's Barry Fell that the island of Sumatra played a major role in the long sea voyages of antiquity.

Fell has claimed that voyages beginning in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa went to Sri Lanka, Sumatra, Eastern Indonesia, New Guinea and out into the Pacific. Manning these ships were Caucasians and Negroes. Fell thinks that these voyagers, on a one-year trip to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (or alternately Peru), would pass into the Pacific on either the north side or south side of New Guinea and then continue past such islands as New Britain, New Ireland, the Solomons, Vanuatu and ultimately arrive at Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. Tonga and Samoa became the main centers in the Pacific.

Pyramids and other megalithic structures found on these islands, like the Ha'amonga stone arch on Tonga, lend credence to this idea.. The traders brought Lapita pottery with them. Later, Tahiti and Hawaii were settled and Rai'tea near Tahiti became the eastern capital. From here such islands as the Marquesas, Rapa Iti and Easter Island were settled. Fell surmises that the ancient seafarers voyaged to Mexico, Central America, Ecuador and Peru from these island bases.

Throughout the Pacific, many of the island's name's include "Ra," the Egyptian name of the sun god. Also, many Easter Island statues have an Egyptian ankh at the base of their spine. Each of the statues re-erected at Anakena Beach by Thor Heyerdahl has a large ankh carved on its back. The location of these carvings at the base of the spine, would seem to symbolize the kundalini power of the spinal column.

The Egyptians built their ships without nails, and a number of ancient ships, many without nails, have been found along the coasts of Australia. Two ships 40 feet long and 9 feet wide, built without nails, have been found

near Perth, Western Australia. Another was found partially hidden underneath a sand dune at Wollongong, New South Wales.

There is a cave painting in the Prince Regent River Valley in the Kimberleys of Western Australia that includes a man with a beard and tall hat, looking very Middle Eastern or Egyptian in origin. Around him are three women with long hair that is tied at the end. These women have been identified as Egyptian dancers with weights at the end of their hair. Their long, weighted hair played an intricate part in their show.

While Australian aboriginals are famous for using boomerangs, it is not well known that Egyptians used them, too. The Egyptians frequently hunted ducks in the marshes of the Nile with boomerangs, and also played games with them. It is an archaeological fact (though not well publicized) that a trunk full of boomerangs was discovered in 1924 when King Tutankhamen's tomb was opened by the archaeologist Howard Carter. Many of these boomerangs, inlaid with gold and lapis lazuli are on display in the Tutankhamen exhibit at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Next to them is an Australian boomerang for comparison.

Boomerangs were also used in southern Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and California. It is likely that the Olmecs used boomerangs as well, and boomerangs can be seen on display in Mexico City's Anthropology Museum. It is an interesting thought that the Australian Aboriginals, as well as tribes in the American Southwest, learned the use of the simple but ingenious boomerang from the Egyptians!

The French researchers Luis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier say in their book, *Eternal Man* (Souvenir Press, 1972):

> In 1963 a strange and disconcerting piece of information came to us from Australia. A pile of Egyptian coins that had been buried for about 4,000 years was found in terrain sheltered by rocks. The readers who gave us this information referred to some rather obscure reviews for there was no mention of this find in any archaeological publication. However, the widely-read Soviet review *TekhnikaMolodezi* which devotes a regular column to unexplained facts with comments on them by experts took up this matter. It even published photographs of the excavated coins.

The anthropologist Elizabeth Gould Davis says in her book *The First Sex* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), "In Australia was found a pendant amulet

of greenstone, carved in the shape of the Celtic cross, an exact duplicate of an amulet found in Egypt at Tel el Amarna, the site of the ancient city where Nefertiti and the Pharaoh Akhenaten held court thirty-five hundred years ago."

The timeframe of Akhenaton and Nefertiti (circa 1200 BC) is also the timeframe for Lapita pottery (circa 1100 BC) and of the Shang Dynasty of China (1600-1028 BC). This is also the timeframe often given for the beginning of the Olmecs.

One clear link between Australia and Egypt is that the Torres Straits Islanders, between New Guinea and Northern Queensland, use the curious practice of mummification of the dead. The Macleay Museum at Sydney University has a mummified corpse of a Darnley Islander (Torres Strait), prepared in a fashion that has been compared to that practiced in Egypt between 1090 and 945 BC.

In 1875 the Shevert Expedition found similarities between Darnley Island boats and ancient trans-Nile boats. The island boats were used to row corpses to sea and leave them on a coral reef. Egyptian practice was to ferry corpses across or down the Nile for desert burial.

Similarly, it was pointed out by Kenneth Gordon Melntyre in his book *The Secret Discovery of Australia* (Picador, 1977) that the island of Mir in the Torres Strait bears the exact same name as the Egyptian word for pyramid, and even that the name for Egypt is "Misr." Another similarity with the Torres Strait Islanders (as well as in the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Polynesia), is the use at nighttime of a wooden headrest was used. This carved headrest was used to slightly elevate the head, while the subject slept on his back. This custom is unusual to ancient Egypt and certain Pacific Islands around New Guinea.

The World of the Ancient Sea Kings

Imagine for a moment a world where oceans were highways for ancient man. Imagine that every few hundred years a sustained effort was made to reach far shores for valuable trading goods. Assume travel across the Atlantic, in larger ships than Columbus used. Imagine travel across the seas in large ships, some of them giant reed ships, others made of wood.

This group sought exotic trading goods, including jade, gold, rare feathers, hallucinogenic drugs, other special herbs, and a host of other

valuable odd items. It is thought that the men who made these trips were a mixed group of ancient seafarers who hailed from ports from Spain and Morocco to Egypt, Ethiopia, Oman, Kerala, Sri Lanka, and Indonesian Islands such as Sumatra, Java and Bali.

These were the ancient sea kings, sometimes called the Atlantean League, or the Hittites of Byblos, or the Phoenicians, or the Khyber. They built and commanded large cargo ships that would carry hundreds of passengers and crew and tons of cargo. Tongaraki canoes used by the Tonga Kings in the central Pacific could hold 300 people. The captains of these ships were royalty and knew the stars and the principles of navigation, much as Polynesians of today understand them.

The captains from the Indian Ocean, often from Oman or the Red Sea, were allied with the Hindu sailors of the southern Indian Ocean. This would include all of India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Going east into the Pacific from Indonesia they ran into the mountainous and wild islands of New Guinea and the Solomons. Then the Pacific opens up and they passed such island archipelagos as Fiji, Tonga, Tahiti and the Marquesas before landing on the North American Coast, probably around Baja California. From here they headed south to Pacific ports near centers like Monte Alban in Oaxaca, Mexico.

These ancient sea kings were a mixed group that included bearded and mustachioed Caucasians, and people with African, Oriental and classic “Chinaman” features. On top of this were dwarves and hunchbacks (both considered good luck), who often served as musicians and storytellers to amuse the crew and keep them entertained. No one was a slave on the ship, though there was a strict hierarchy. All were welcomed heartily in the

festivities that were had at the many ports of call, and all shared in the booty. For the sailor who had made a few voyages, it would be a fulfilling and profitable life.

On board, beside the captain and his close mates, there would have been a priest of sorts, a shaman and magician. He would deal with the local plant experts and obtain the correct herbs and hallucinagens. These priests apparently even wore pointed hats and otherwise acted as we might expect some ancient wizard to act.

Chinese Eunuchs and Circumnavigation

Recently, popular and well-reviewed books have come out that champion the historical facts of early Chinese voyages literally, around the world. In his best-selling book 1421: *The Year China Discovered the World*, author Gavin Menzies maintains that a massive fleet of junks that were nearly 500 feet long was launched on March 8 of that year. This fleet was under the command of eunuch admirals loyal to the Emperor Zhu Di and they were to sail to the end of the earth to collect tribute from the barbarians. They were to go beyond the seas' and thereby unite the world in Confucian harmony. The journey of this eunuch admiral fleet would take two years and circumnavigate the world, Menzies claims.

In another book about China's pre-Columbian explorations, *When China Ruled the Seas* by Louise Levathes, the author maintains that Shang Chinese were sailing to the Americas circa 1000 BC. Although she does not specifically maintain that Olmecs were part of the Shang Chinese contact with Mexico, other archeologists and historians have done so, including some linked to the prestigious Smithsonian Institution.

The Smithsonian Institution published a monograph in 1974 entitled "The Transpacific Origin of Mesoamerican Civilization" by Betty J. Meggers. Meggers is a career archeologist and is still employed by the Smithsonian Institution as of 2007. In her monograph, Meggers says:

> Anthropologists generally assume that civilization developed independently in the eastern and western hemispheres. Review of the features that distinguish the Olmec culture of Mesoamerica from preceding village farming groups shows, however, that many are present in the earlier Shang civilization of China. If Olmec civilization originated from a transpacific stimulus, this has important implications both for

reconstruction of New World cultural development and for formulation of a valid theory of the evolution of civilization.

Aside from the culture evolution, no theory has provoked more violent dissension among anthropologists than transpacific contact. These two topics were considered intertwined by the early diffusionists who argued that American Indian civilizations were a consequence of introductions from Old World sources such as Egypt, Phoenicia, Israel, Atlantis, and Mu (Wauchope 1962). By contrast, recent theorists have taken for grated that civilization arose repeatedly (Cameiro 1970: 733; Flannery 1972-400) or at least independently in the Old and New Worlds (Phillips 1966:314; Chard 1969:268; Daniel 1970). …This paper will review the context and characteristics of the earliest civilization of Mesoamerica, known as Olmec, and compare them with the Shang civilization of China. Discussion of the significance of the many striking similarities will illustrate some of the theoretical problems that must be resolved before a reliable foundation can be laid for a theory of the origin of civilization.

In her Smithsonian paper Meggers gives archaeological evidence of the Olmec as the earliest civilization in Mesoamerica, discussing their pyramids, monuments, art, calendars, trade, and religion. She then discusses the various characteristics of Shang civilization. Among the similarities between these two societies, she says, are their writing styles, the esteemed use of and long-distance trade in jade, the use of batons as symbols of rank, their settlement patterns as well as architectural styles, the long-range acquisition of luxury goods, possession of feline deities, and the use of cranial deformation.

While she admits the difficulty of the task, Meggers concludes that the Shang-Olmec similarities can be used to prove either independent development or cultural diffusion. The basic difficulty we face, she notes, is that a search for cultural origins is handicapped by both unrecognized biases and limitations of data.

Similarly, one of Meggers's students, Vincent H. Malmstrom, writes in his monograph "Izapa: Cultural Hearth of the Olmecs," published by Dartmouth College (available online at: www.dartmouth.edu/ ~izapa/ M-6.pdf) that the ancient city of Izapa, near the Pacific Coast in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was a major seaport with contacts with Ecuador, and probably Shang China.

Says Malmstrom:

> Located near the edge of the Pacific coastal plain in the far southeastern corner of Chiapas, Mexico, is the large pre-Columbian ceremonial center known as Izapa. Situated on the terrace of a small stream tributary to the Rio Suchiate, the border river between Mexico and Guatemala, the site consists of more than 130 mounds sprawled over several hectares of lush tropical lowland at the base of the volcano Tacaná, the second highest mountain (4,094 meters) in Central America. Although scarcely half a dozen of Izapa's cobble-studded mounds and pyramids have been restored to date, it is clear that they once formed part of an elaborate, well-planned complex of considerable magnitude and

importance. Just how important this complex may be is only now emerging.

Archeologists have tentatively assigned Izapa to the Late Formative Period (corresponding roughly to 600-100 B.C.), primarily on the basis of stylistic evidence (Bernal, 1969, 127). There is, nevertheless, good reason to believe that Izapa is far older than such evidence would suggest. Indeed, Bernal concedes that Izapa may be synchronous with the oldest known Olmec sites at San Lorenzo and La Venta (Bernal, 1969, 173). It has been shown, for example, that a settled, village way-of-life was in existence in the region of Izapa possibly as early as 1500 B.C., judging from the radiocarbon dating of finds at Ocós, on the coast of Guatemala just forty-five kilometers away (Bernal, 1969, 127). Additional evidence, admittedly circumstantial, has been provided recently as a result of the author's identification of Izapa as the birthplace both of the Mesoamerican calendrical systems and of the knowledge of magnetism among the region's pre-Columbian cultures.

…Yet, if the author's hypotheses are correct, then two astronomical fix-points can be established against which to test the one precise date bequeathed to us by the Mayan chronologists—and presumably the Olmecs before them. This is the date selected as the origin of the Long Count system, equated as August 13, 3113 B.C. by the Goodman-Martínez-Thompson correlation. Elsewhere (in press) the author explains how he determined that the Long Count system—a fusing of both the 260-day religious almanac and the 365-day secular calendar—would appear to have been devised in 235 B.C., a date originally suggested as early as 1930 by Teeple but likewise discounted by Thompson (Thompson, 1960,152). Encouraged by the knowledge that he had reached independently the same conclusion as an earlier scholar whom Thompson had lauded for his mathematical 'brilliance' in other connections (Thompson, 1960, 225), the author employed a computer to 'run back' both the secular and sacred calendars to their starting points. For the secular calendar this meant that a day known to the Mayas as "0 Pop" should coincide with the summer solstice, whereas for the sacred almanac a day called "1 Imix" should coincide with August 13. As a result of this operation, the author has shown that the secular calendar probably dates from June 21, 1323 B.C., and that the sacred almanac traces its origin to August 13,1358 B.C.

Significantly, both dates are entirely in accord with the radio-carbon determinations from the Ocós area south of Izapa and from the San Lorenzo area of Veracruz state, which was presumably one of the first Olmec sites into which the calendrical “principles” diffused. Had Izapa served solely as the birthplace of Mesoamerican calendrics that would have been reason enough to regard it as a major cultural hearth amongst the Olmecs. However, in at least one other field of knowledge Izapa seems to have been in the vanguard of Olmec learning as well, namely terrestrial magnetism. For some time, researchers have believed that the Mayas were aware of magnetism, apparently using it to align the structures in their major ceremonial centers (Fuson, 1969, 494).

Then, in 1973, Coe discovered a small bar of polished hematite at San Lorenzo that he assumed may have been used as part of a compass. Found in a layer dated to approximately 1000 B.C., this suggests that the Olmecs were aware of magnetism about a millenium before the Chinese (Carlson, 1975, 753). However, during field work at Izapa in January, 1975, the author discovered evidence that the inhabitants of this site not only knew about magnetism but that they also seem to have associated it with the homing instinct in the sea-turtle. Such a conclusion stems from the fact that a large sculpture of a turtle head, located about thirty meters to the southeast of the main pyramid, has been carved from a basaltic boulder rich in magnetic iron and executed with such precision that all the magnetic lines of force come to focus in the turtle’s snout. Although no other magnetic stones have been found at Izapa, there are at least two other representations of the turtle present at the site.

One of these is a sculpture near the east wall of the main pyramid which has the shape of an upturned turtle shell and which, when filled with water during the rainy season, may have provided a frictionless surface on which to float a needle or sliver of lodestone. The other is a large altar in the form of a turtle at the west end of the ceremonial ball court, in whose north wall is embedded a carving of a bearded man standing in a boat moving across the waves. That the Izapans were a sea-faring people and maintained relatively regular contacts with places as far distant as Ecuador over a long period of time has been shown by the similarities in ceramics found in the two areas (Coe, 1966, 45; Badner, 1972, 24).

> That they should have failed to observe the great migrations of east Pacific Ridleys moving between Baja California and Ecuador or of the black turtle which migrates between the Guatemalan coast and the Galápagos Islands while on such voyages is quite inconceivable (Carr, 1967, 136, 216). And that they should have been impressed by the sureness of the turtle's navigational ability and compared this to the direction-finding property of the lodestone would have taken no great leap of imagination. Whether Izapa's maritime connections included trans-Pacific contacts cannot be demonstrated at this point, though Meggers, among others, has presented striking evidence of similarities between the Olmecs and the Shang-dynasty Chinese (Meggers, 1975, 17). In any event, it would appear that Izapa served as a major center of cultural innovation in Mesoamerica, whether as a trans-Pacific bridgehead or as a hearth in its own right.

Therefore, Izapa may have been a major Olmec-Shang port on the Pacific. As such, many of the overland roads from Oaxaca and other areas would have converged at Izapa or nearby. Goods from the Atlantic side of the isthmus would have been brought overland as well, and it may well be the case that tons of jade, gold, hallucinogenic mushrooms, chocolate and other valuable trade items were shipped out of Izapa back across the Pacific —some of it no doubt getting back to China. Later, Spain ran this lucrative trade through their ports in Manila and Acapulco.

In a *US News & World Report* story published November 4, 1996, it was reported that a Chinese language scholar named Han Ping Chen examined the famous Olmec figures and accompanying jade celts found at La Venta which are now at the National Museum of Anthropology. According to the news magazine he declared after examining some "writing" on the celts that, "Clearly, these are Chinese characters." Meggers became involved in this important discovery, and we will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6.

So, are we now to think of the frowning babies with no genitals as Chinese eunuchs? Are they unhappy at having their genitals removed, or are they unhappy because their homeland of China has been destroyed and they cannot go back?

Do we now have an explanation as to why obviously Negroid figures have Oriental features as well? Were the Negroids taken from Africa or

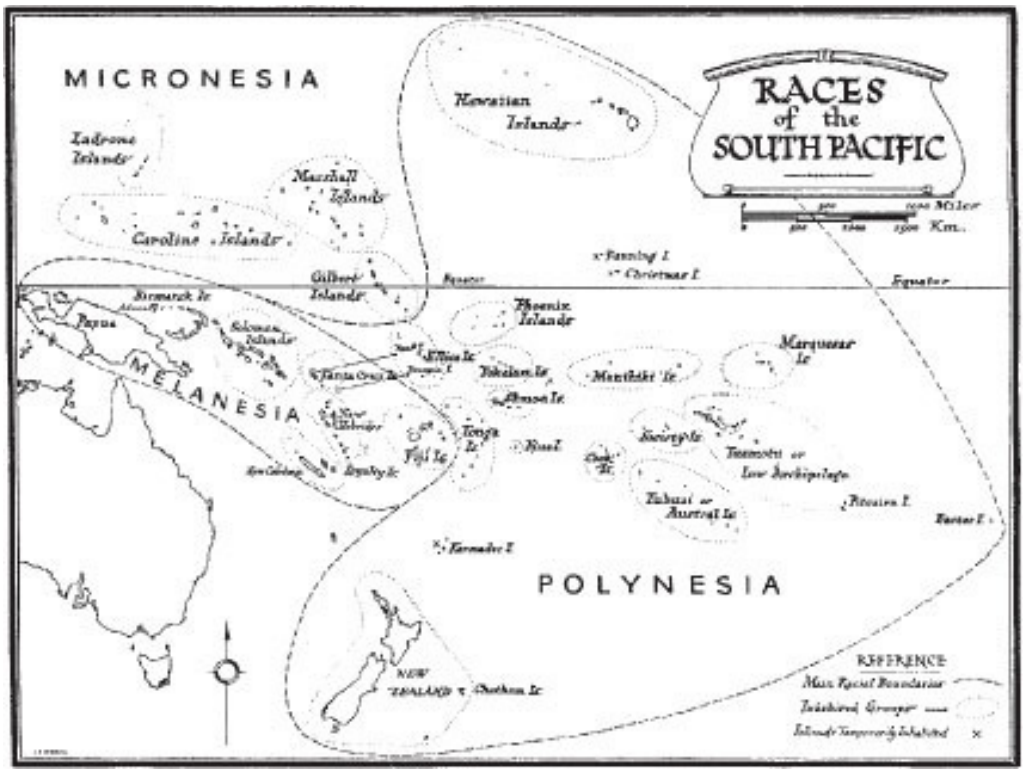
Melanesia to become a warrior class cultured by the Chinese voyagers as their army? Did they intermix?

Picture this: raised from infancy, and partially Chinese from Chinese mothers, they are castrated at a young age and specially trained in martial arts, sailing, and diplomacy. They are military men, of large stature and well armed. They are disciplined, and with a small group of men, a Chinese-Olmec general is able to make his small army win on the beach of any remote island or shore. As specially-trained Chinese eunuchs, they were transoceanic kings, commanding respect everywhere they went. They were adulated, and monuments were built to them. They were powerful warriors, and in some cases “magicians.”

But, they were eunuchs, and could not engage in sex for pleasure. Their pleasures were food and drink. As dignitaries and lords, they would have been treated as royalty, consuming large amounts of food and probably drinking hallucinogenic beverages. Thusly, these Chinese-Olmec eunuchs may have spent much of their time as were-jaguars, communing with the local spirits and totem animals.

Meanwhile, the Land of Olman would not just be isolated to the Pacific coast. Because of the narrow Isthmus of Tehuantepec, with only a short journey overland, they could have port cities on the Atlantic Coast as well. Nothing succeeds like success, and if the Olmecs were able to develop a trade network throughout the isthmus, they could become the dominant culture of the area.

Olmec polychrome mural from the cave santuary at Oxtotilán in Guerrero State, Mexico. The person is depicted wearing an eagle or eagle-jaguar skin and sitting on an altar with decorations of a snarling feline. Perhaps the earliest rendition of the popular eagle dance.



The Pacific is divided into three distinct racial areas.

The Olmecs had wheeled toys like this one in the Xalapa Museum.

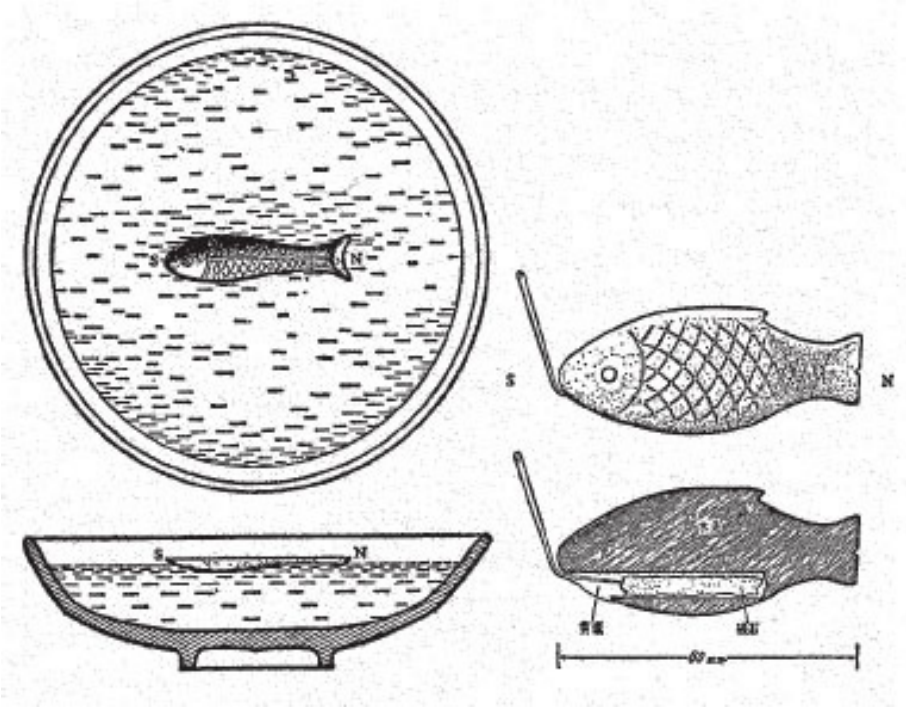
Olmec figurines. Above: Ceramic eunuch baby. Below: Bearded man from Comacalco.

Two depictions of the hunchback dwarf Egyptian god Bes, the god of good-luck. Above: At the Egyptian temple of Dendera. Right: This statue at in the National Anthropology Museum in Cairo looks very much like the Tiki good luck gods of Polynesia.

Boomerangs on display at the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

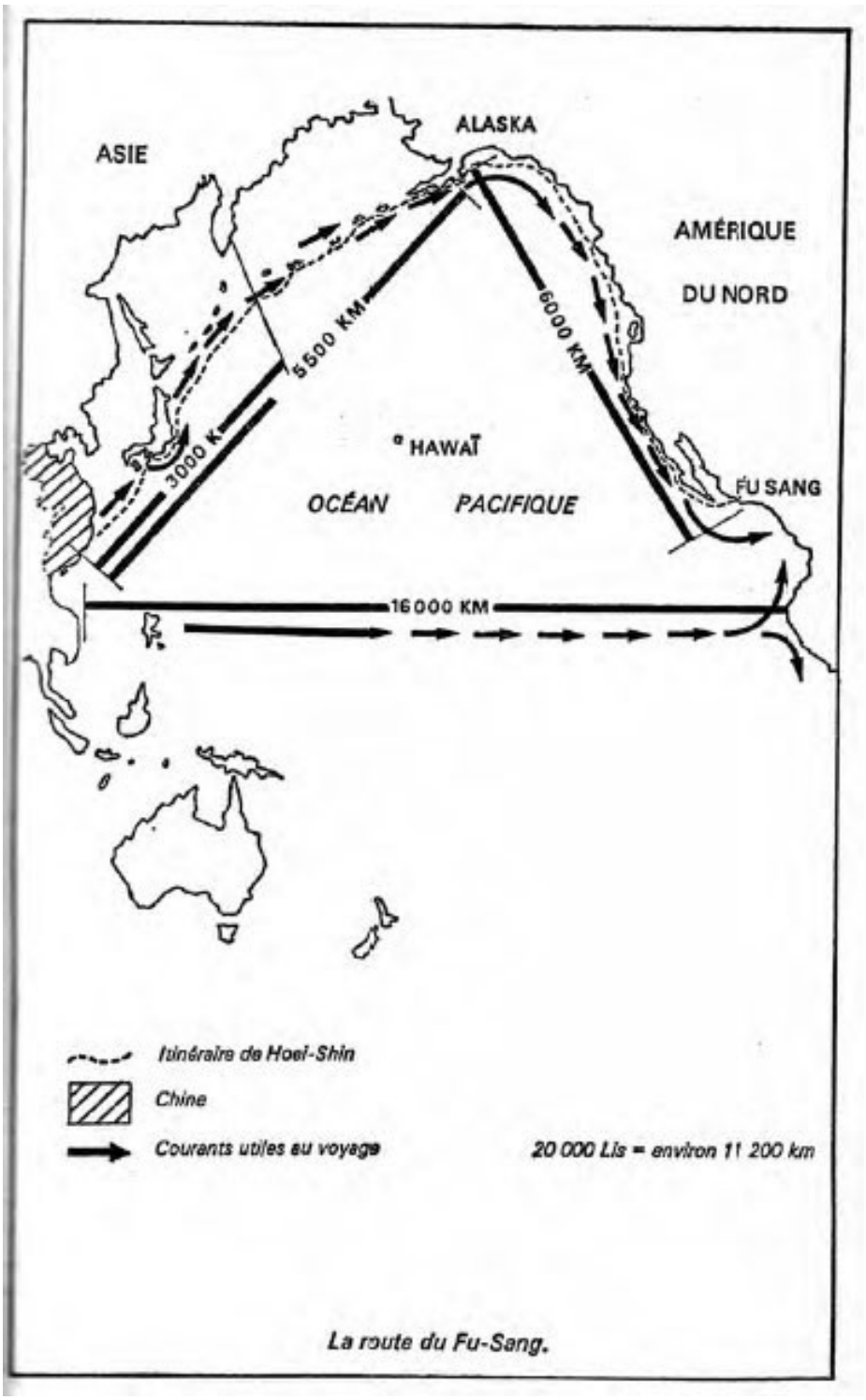
Egyptians hunting with boomerangs.

Clay heads from Comacalco, showing foreign characteristics.

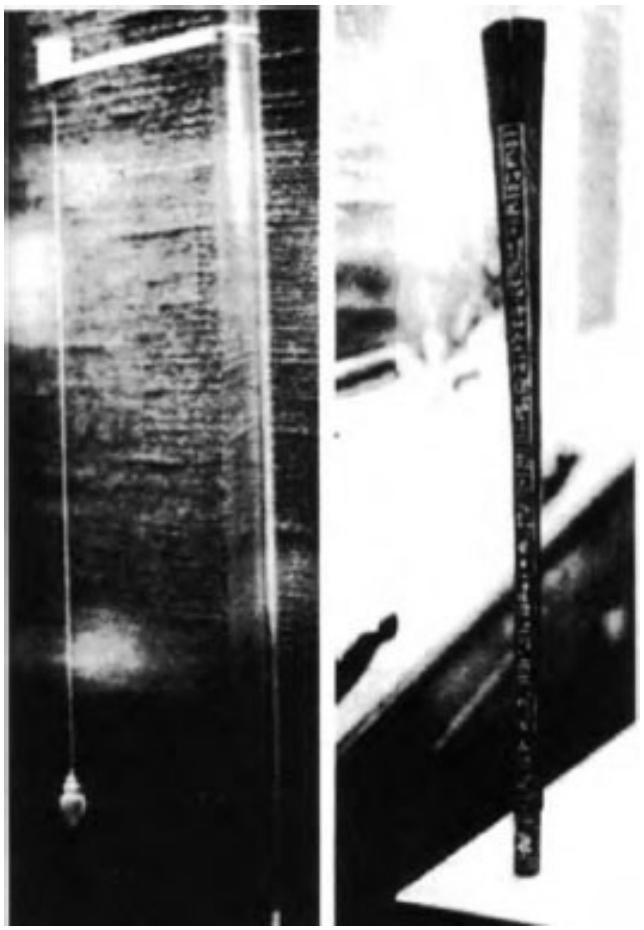


Chinese compass.

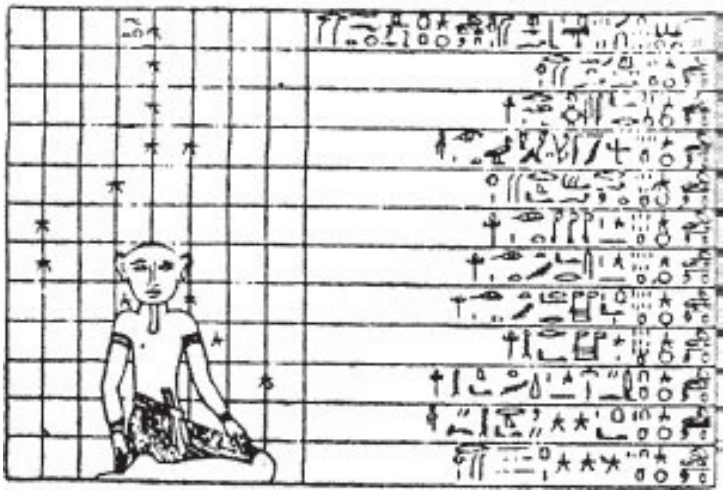
Egyptian scribe statue in a variation of the quizuo position.



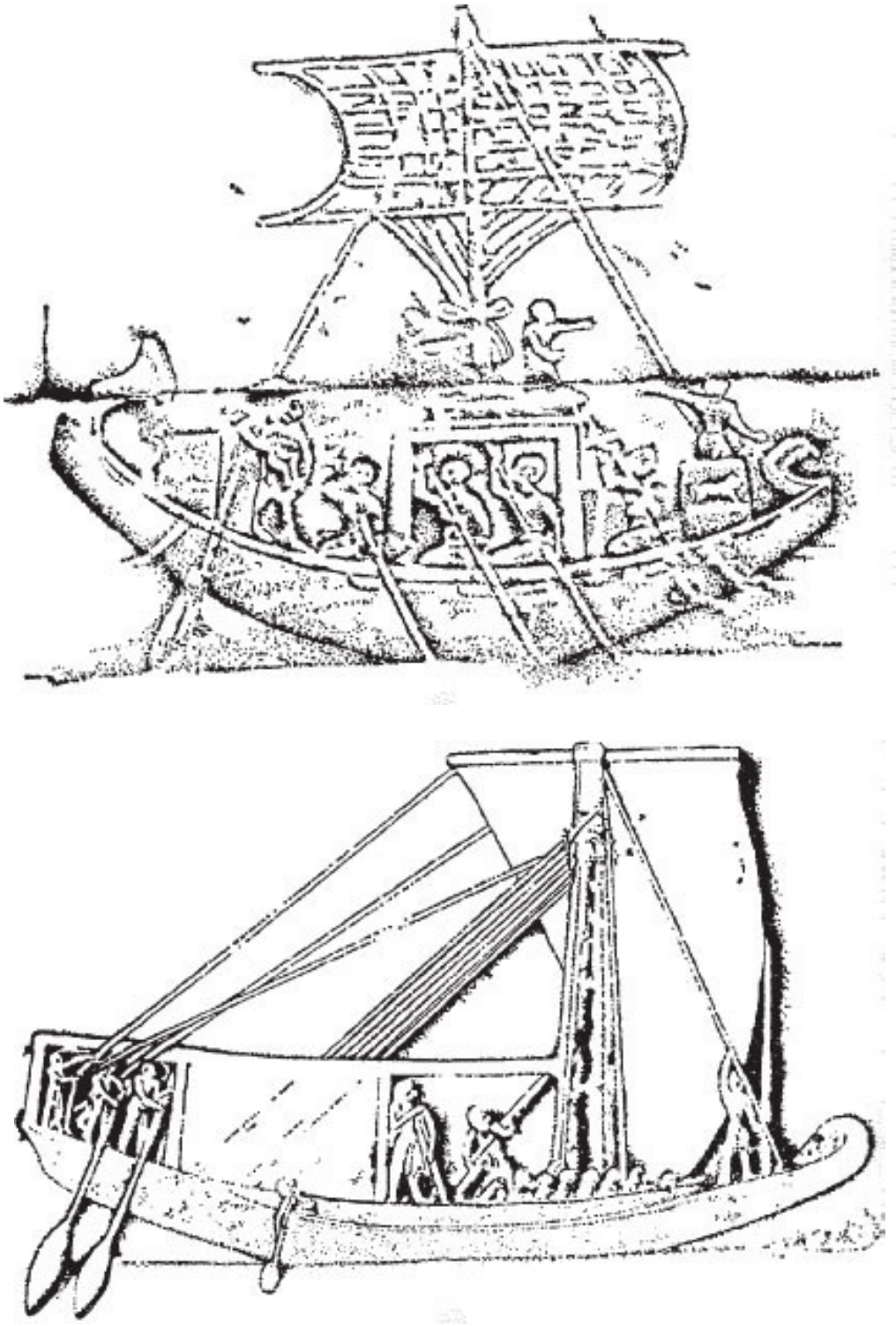
Chinese routes to the Americas.



Egyptian navigation stick.



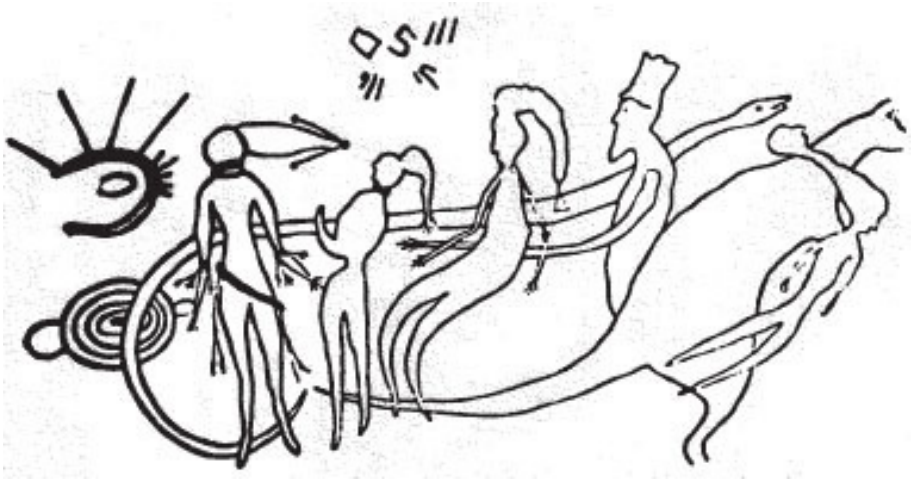
Egyptian Ramesside Star Clock.



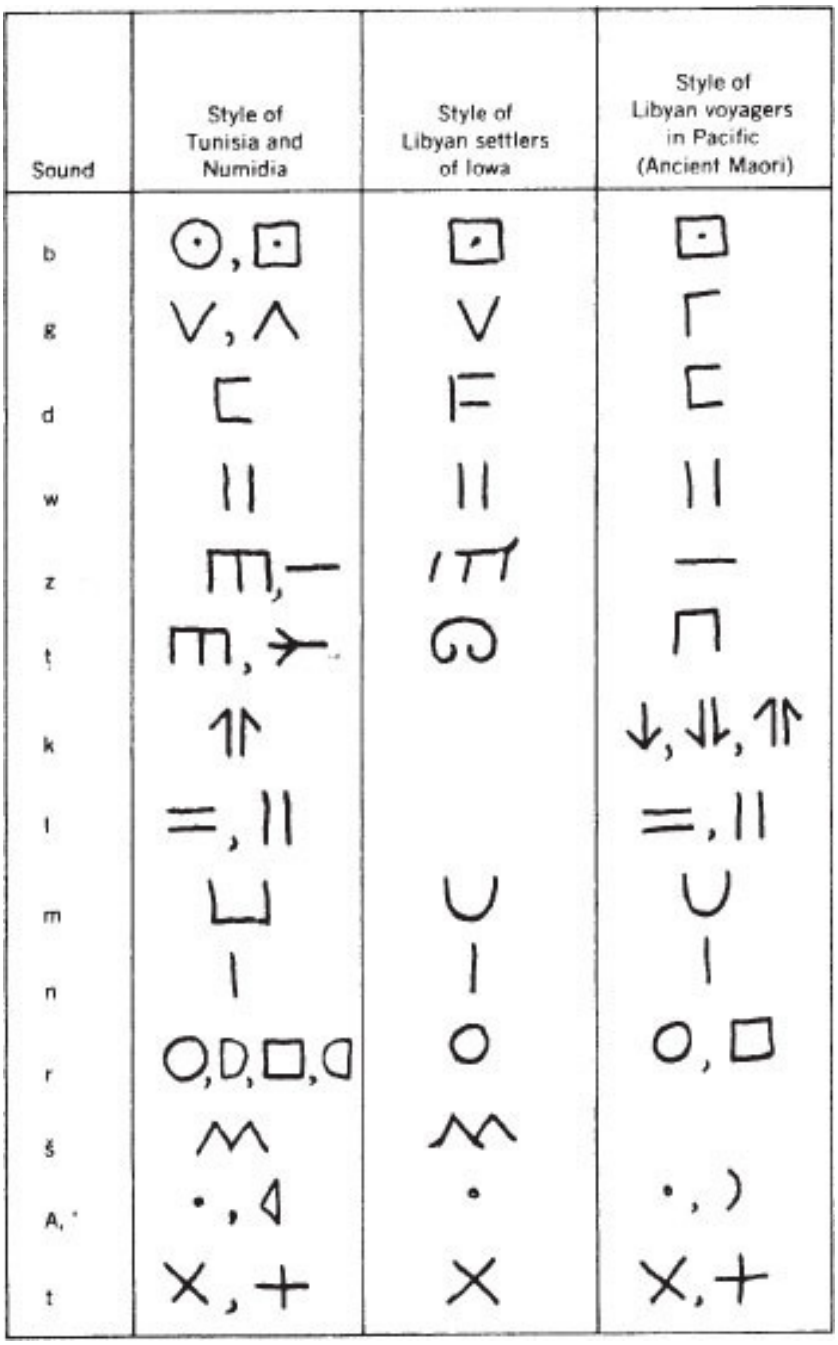
Egyptian reed ships.

Buddhist shrines with Buddha emerging from a cave.

Indus Valley script compared with Easter Island Rongo Rongo script and the Greek-Hittite script Linear A.



Ancient cave painting in the Kimberley Mountains of Western Australia depicting, among other things, a man with a beard and tall hat plus dancers with weights at the end of their hair for tossing about, a style popular among the Egyptians.

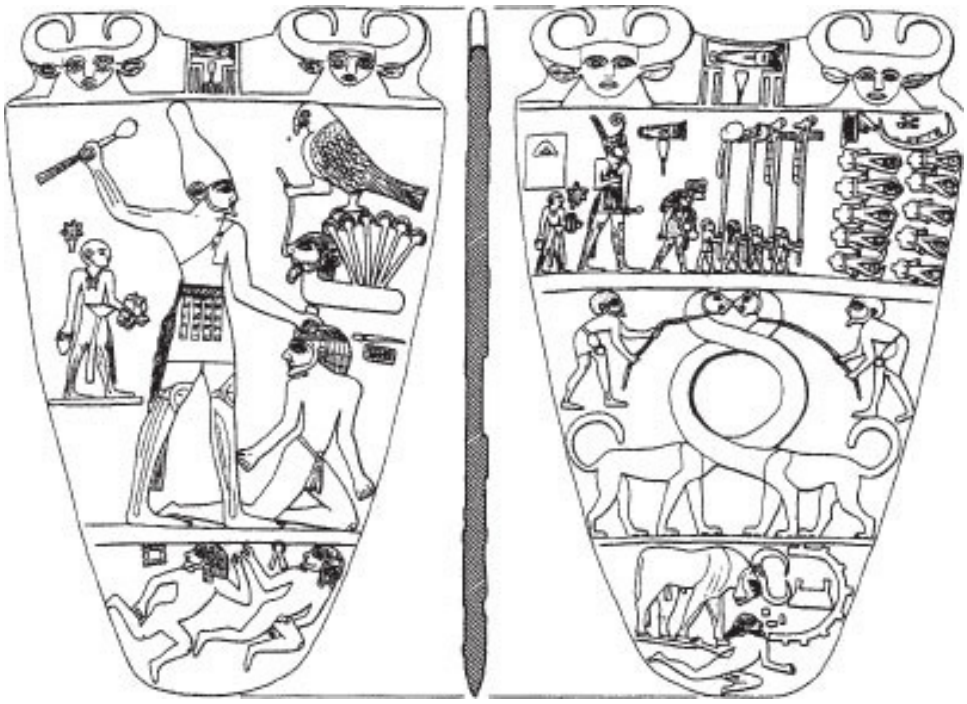


Barry Fell’s chart of Libyan script.

A 1799 print of the Tonga Pyramids, well situated in the central Pacific.

An old photo of one of the stones used in the Tonga Pyramids.

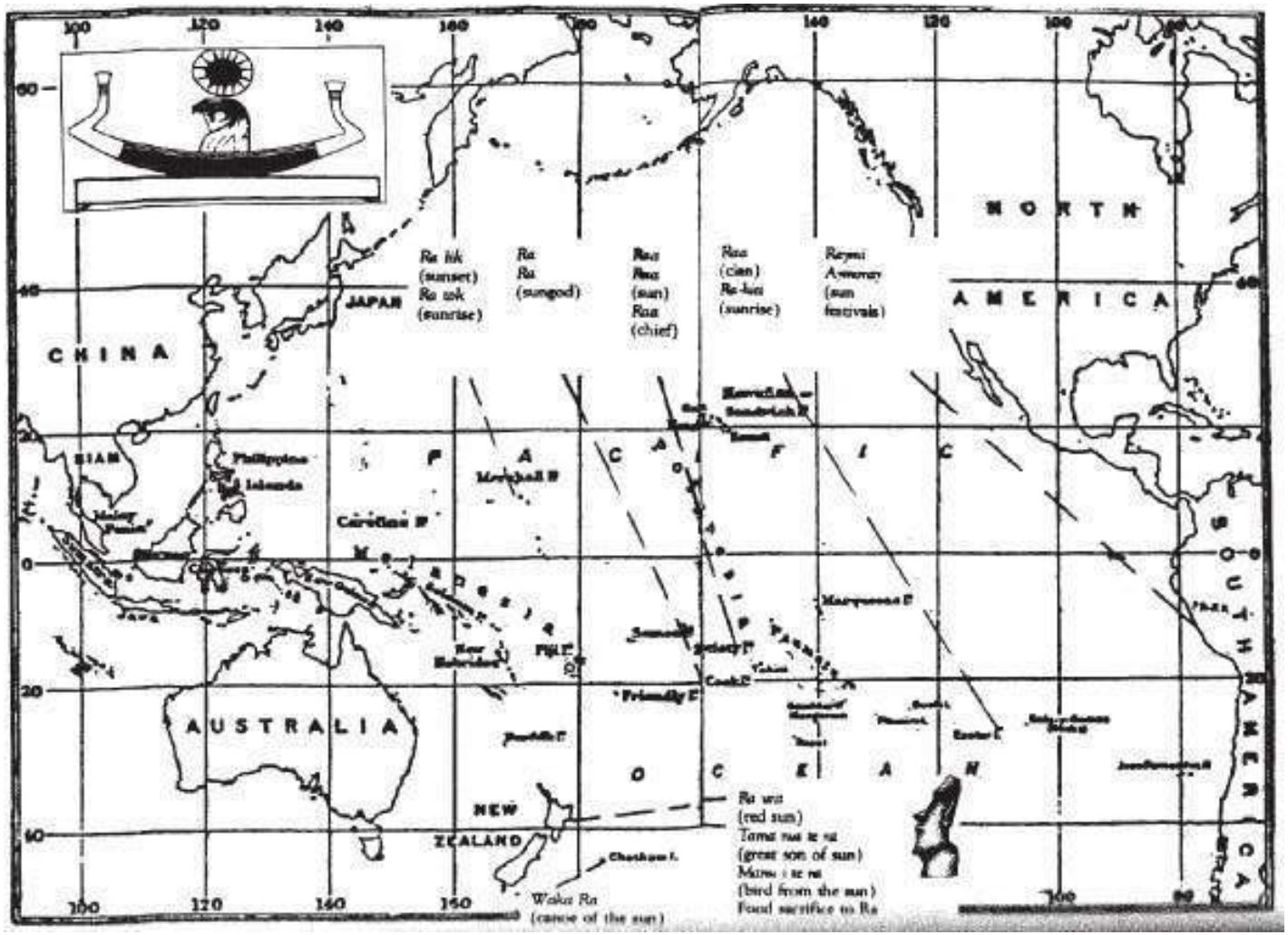
Top: Olmec “eunuch” baby. Bottom: Mayan statue of a man with a thick mustache.

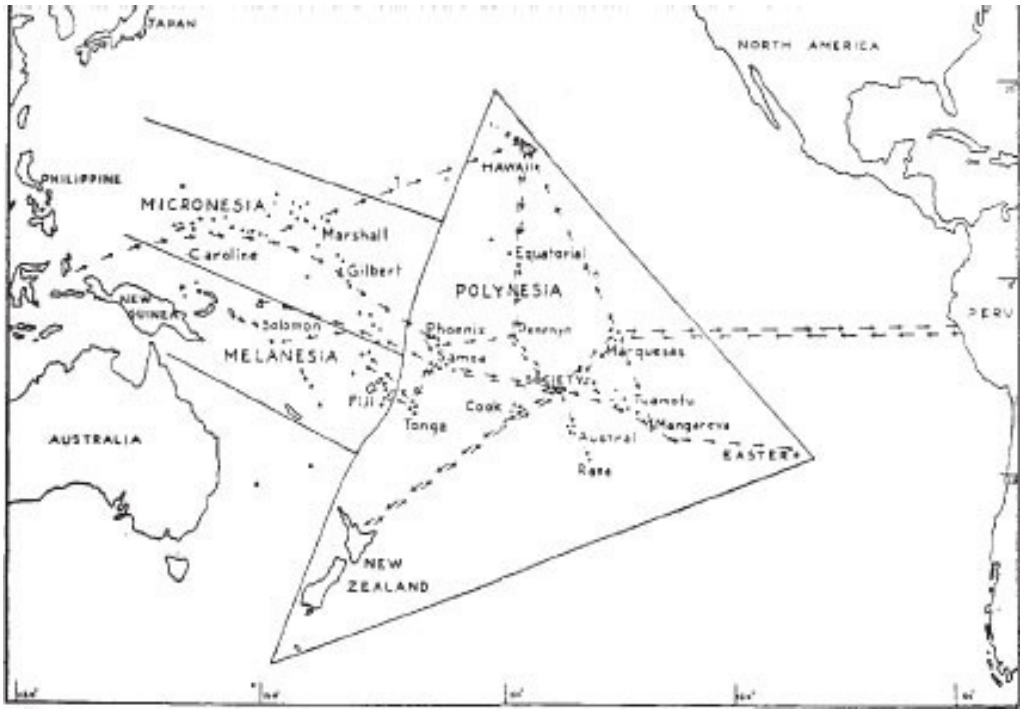


Top: Narmer Tablet from Egypt. Bottom: Xalapa Museum “neck stone.”

Phimacan-Kas pyramid, Angkor Tom, Cambodia.

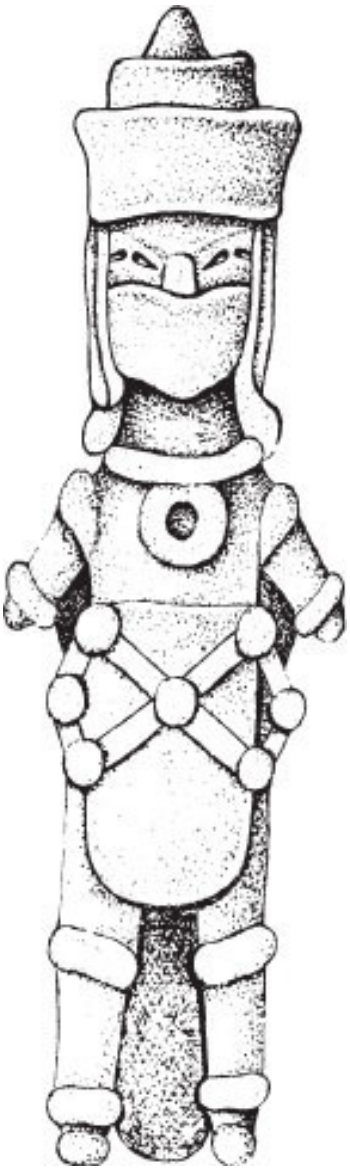
Megalithic tomb from Madagascar. Any similarities to Olmec tombs?


CHINA
JAPAN
SIAM
AUSTRALIA
NEW ZEALAND
NORTH AMERICA
SOUTH AMERICA
Ra tik (sunset) Ra uok (sunrise)
Ra Ra (sungod)
Raa Raa (sun) Raa (chief)
Raa (clan) Ra-lua (sunrise)
Reyni Aymoray (sun festivals)
Ra ura (red sun)
Tama raa te ra (great son of sun)
Manu : te ra (bird from the sun)
Food sacrifice to Ra
Waka Ra (canoe of the sun)



The Polynesian Triangle and its routes to Peru and Mesoamerica.

These Olmec clay figurines from La Venta look very much like Chinese.



Clay figurines from Tlatilco, Veracruz. The figurine on the left is thought to depict a shaman. Note his elaborate costume, mask and that he apparently has four eyes.

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5.

THE MYSTERY OF OLMEC CRANIAL DEFORMATION

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We elongate the heads of our children because it us our tradition and it originates with the basic spiritual beliefs of our people. We also see that those with elongated heads are more beautiful, and such long heads also indicate wisdom.
—South Malakulan saying translated by Kirk Huffman
for the Australian Museum

The Olmecs and Cranial Deformation

Among the many strange things about the Olmecs, cranial deformation is one of the most bizarre. It is a practice that was shared with the peoples of Peru, some Pacific islands, tribes in Africa, the Kurds of Iraq and the Egyptians—as well as many other cultures. It is an unusual custom that spans both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

To the uninitiated, the deformed skulls are rather shocking. They come in all shapes and sizes, some extremely elongated and pointed, and some rather squarish, instead of pointed. Just exactly who these people were, why they reshaped heads, and how they created the odd modifications are something of a mystery. As skull elongations are the most prevalent; perhaps we should look into some of the various explanations for the creation of these coneheads.

The scientific term given to this custom is *dolichocephaly.* Most anthropological papers use the term cranial deformation. The layman and pop media like to call them coneheads. Many Americans are familiar with an old *Saturday Night Live* routine featuring Dan Akroyd and gang as the strange family “The Coneheads.” The skit was so popular, a feature-length movie with the same name was produced. This bizarre family of comical weirdos had long, bald heads that were about twice as long as a normal human head—heads which came to a sharp point at the top. The coneheads cover story for not quite fitting in was that they came from France, but they

were clearly meant to be aliens learning about earthlings. How close might the comedy sketch come to pinpointing the origin of the practice of skull elongation?

Anthropologists have long known that cranial deformation can be accomplished while humans are still infants. Infants would have their heads bound with pieces of wood and rope, or some sort of constrictive cloth, that forced their heads to grow in an elongated and unnatural way.

The skull is bound while the plates in a baby's skull have not yet fused together, and the materials are adjusted and tightened as time goes on. After several years of this skull binding, the chila's head is permanently growing in an elongated fashion, and once the child becomes eight or nine years old (sometimes earlier) the skull has formed in an elongated fashion that no longer requires any binding.

It is known that the Olmecs and the Mayas of Central America had dolichocephalous crania in many cases. Though skeletal material is often difficult to find in tropical areas because of the fast rate of decomposition, jade figurines attributed to the Olmecs have been found that show persons with elongated heads, so we know that this curious "fashion" was widespread, found from the Andes to the jungles of Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, to the coasts and mountains of Mexico. It even reached the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

The largest freshwater lake west of the Mississippi is Flathead Lake in western Montana, so named because the local Native Americans in the area were called the Flathead Indians. They were called the Flathead Indians because they had the curious elongated and flattened heads that resulted from cranial deformation.

Similarly, at the time that first European explorers got to the Seattle area of the Pacific Northwest, they found that the local Chinook tribes had elongated and flattened skulls. The early Russian, Spanish and English explorers who came into the area documented these strange customs, and early drawings exist of a woman with a dolichocephalous cranium who is holding a child in a wooden "deformation cradle" on her lap. The child will have an elongated head much like his mother through this head binding technique. Curiously, she appears in the drawing to have writing-like tattoos on her skin, and unusually small feet; possibly they are bound when she was an infant, as her head.

It is also known that the ancient Egyptian royalty such as Akhenaton, Nefertiti, Tutankhamum, Meritaton and others had dolichocephalous crania. Nefertiti was not an Egyptian, but from Mittani, an area of northern Iraq that was thought to be aligned with the Hittites and ancient India (this is the area of the Kurds, today). While skeletons of Akhenaton, Nefertiti and their children have never been discovered we do have paintings and sculptures of them, and they are indeed depicted with elongated crania. We do have the mummy of Tutankhamun, and his skull is dolichocephalous.

So here we have a curious connection between the Atonist period of Egypt (circa 1200 BC) and the Olmecs through the strange and unusual practice of head binding and cranial deformation. Since we see this custom in evidence in such far-flung places as Malta, Egypt, Iraq, the Pacific Islands and the Americas, a question arises: did all these cultures independently develop this unusual practice—and if so, why? The mainstream archeologists, because of their isolationist stance, must maintain that the custom of cranial deformation did indeed arise independently in most areas.

In terms of the of Olmecs, the known fact that cranial deformation was used by them would, by default, make them the originators of the custom, at least in Mesoamerica. But this might be going too far, given what we are being told about the Olmecs by the conservative authorities. As mentioned in Chapter One, University of Alabama archeologist Richard Diehl says that the Olmecs were an isolated group within their region with little contact even with other tribes in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec:

> There is no evidence that they formed a single unified ethnic group, and almost certainly no Olmec considered people living more than a few hours' walk away as members of his or her own group. Nevertheless, the numerous independent local cultures were so similar to one another that modern scientists consider them a single generic culture.

So, according to Diehl, the "numerous independent local cultures" only a few hours' walk from each other must have each decided, quite without the knowledge that that anyone else was doing it, to bind up their babies' heads until they were grossly misshapen.

Diehl's book mentions of cranial deformation only in passing, in an Olmec burial at Tlatilco:

> …Another burial held the remains of a male whose skull had been deliberately modified in infancy and whose teeth were trimmed into geometric patterns as an adult. He may have been a shaman since all the objects placed with him were likely part of a shaman's power bundle. They included small *metates* for grinding hallucinogenic mushrooms, clay effigies of mushrooms, quartz, graphite, pitch, and other exotic materials that could have been used in curing rituals.

Perhaps, the lack of discussion of cranial deformation is an actual avoidance of the topic. While little is really known about cranial deformation, except how it was done, it is a curious part of Olmec and Mayan culture, a custom that they are well known for, as are the ancient Peruvians along the desert coast, especially around Paracas, Ica, and Nazca, south of Lima. It was also practiced at Tiahuanaco high in the Andes. One would think this strange practice would arouse curiosity and speculation, but since the Olmecs are said to be an isolated group, mentioning cranial deformation might just invite discussion of its widespread use, and prove counter-productive in a book promoting the isolationist point of view.

Cranial deformation, because it is so unusual and found worldwide, would seem to be clear evidence of transoceanic contact. Not only was cranial deformation popular throughout the Americas but it was done all over the world. The popularity of this rather bizarre cultural practice would seem to arise from cultural diffusion, not cultures isolated from each other.

What was the Reason for Cranial Deformation?

The big question, actually, is why did these ancient civilizations, right up until the time of the European conquest in the case of the Pacific Northwest, practice this artificial skull deformation?

Theories include such ideas that they thought that bigger heads meant smarter people; that it was a form of imitation of "visitors" who had elongated crania; that it was part of some oddball religious practice; that it was to distinguish a priestly and royal elite; or a combination of some or all of these theories.

The "technology" of deforming crania was relatively simple and could be done by any family that had a newborn infant, a couple of pieces of wood and some rope. All it really took was some patience and time. But once again we have to ask ourselves—why would this be the style?

Central to any unified theory on cranial deformation is the fascinating fact that this was a style that spread to remote corners of the earth. The Land of Olman on the Isthmus of Tehauntepec would have actually been a central area for such diffusion. Was there a time thousands of years ago when priests around the world all had elongated crania? By sheer "coincidence" this would appear so, as we will see. Cranial deformation was apparently a widespread fad thousands of years ago, lasting up until modern times, and the Olmecs apparently took part in it.

Were they wanting to look like a race of beings that actually had naturally elongated skulls? The best hypothesis in my opinion is that the head binding seen worldwide was done in emulation of an ancient long-headed race (either natural or forced) that brought wisdom and knowledge to our ancestors. We have some evidence of this from the modern races that still practiced head binding (such as those on Vanuatu) where the reason was said to be because of the visits of a highly intelligent foreign race that was to be imitated.

Head Binding in Africa and Vanuatu

Head binding and cranial deformation continued up until modern times in many places, including parts of Africa, Vanuatu, and among the Kurds of northern Iraq. Remote areas of Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides) were still doing head binding up until around World War II. According to the Australian Museum's website on Vanuatu cranial deformation, "The Culture Hero *Ambat* is associated with the origin of head binding in certain coastal areas of southern Malakula, Vanuatu. Ambat himself had an elongated head and a fine, long nose. Head elongation styles vary slightly among the many different language and cultural areas of southern Malakula. The area where people have the longest elongated heads is the Nahai-speaking area of Tomman Island and the south south-western Malakulan mainland opposite. A person with a finely elongated head is thought to be more intelligent, of higher status and close to the world of the spirits. Even today, throughout Vanuatu, the Bislama/Pidgin English term, Longfala Hed (Long Head) is synonymous with intelligence."

According to the museum, in these areas head binding began approximately a month after birth. Each day the child's head was smeared with burnt paste made from the Navanai-Molo nut. This process softens the skin and prevents "binding rash." The child's head was then bound with a

soft bandage made from the inner bark of a type of banana tree. Over this was placed a specially woven basket made from Nibirip and this was bound around with a fiber rope. This process continued every day for approximately six months to produce the required shape.

The reason that the tribesmen practiced cranial deformation was that they believed that long-headed people were more intelligent, apparently because of these early heroes with coneheads that they greatly admired. The museum quotes one Vanuatu native as saying, “We elongate the heads of our children because it is our tradition and it originates with the basic spiritual beliefs of our people. We also see that those with elongated heads are more handsome or beautiful, and such long heads also indicate wisdom.”

The museum also says that among the Bintulu Malanus Dayak people of Borneo it was considered a sign of beauty to have a flat forehead. The process of flattening the head was started during the first month of a baby’s life with a tool called a tadal. A cushion was placed on the child’s forehead with bands placed over the top of the head and around the back of the head. The strings holding the bands in position were adjusted without disturbing the baby. In the early stages, only very slight pressure was applied, but gradually the pressure was increased.

The site also mentions that the Mangbetu people of northeast Democratic Republic of the Congo also practiced head elongation. Babies’ heads were bound with cloth to create the desired shape. When the person was an adult the elongation effect was emphasized by wrapping the hair around a woven basket frame so that the head appeared even more elongated.

Curiously, they also mention that in some parts of Europe, especially France, head elongation was practiced up until the late 19th century. In the

Deux-Sevres area, head elongation involved wrapping the baby's head in a tight bandage. The binding was left for a period of two to four months and was then replaced with a fitted basket. When the baby was older, the basket was strengthened with metal thread.

Indeed, it seems that one of the goals in head binding was to make thecranium as long as possible. It made the person taller, gave him more brain capacity, and, needless to say, a very special look that would distinguish the conehead from other folks with normal crania. One has wonder if the person with longest cranium was deemed the more important "priest," "priest-king," or whatnot. The more we look into cranial deformation, the more puzzling it becomes, and no simple answers for this phenomenon are forthcoming. This may be a good reason why most archeologists steer away from the subject as much as possible, as it quickly leads into a quagmire of questions that are best left unanswered if the theory of isolationism is to be continued unchecked: Why and how would such a practice have originated in the first place? Why would independent cultures —allegedly without contact with each other—have created such a practice? Were persons with elongated crania of a special royal class in each of these societies? Did ancient brain surgery, trepanning and modern medical practice originate as a result of cranial deformation?

Olmec Cranial Deformation and the V-Form Cleft

There is not much to be found on cranial deformation in the few books available on the Olmecs, except that it exists. Many authors largely ignore the whole subject, but include the many Olmec figurines with obvious cranial deformations in their books, while others touch briefly on the topic.

Ignacio Bernal devotes two pages to the subject in his important 1969 book *The Olmec World.* He has this to say while discussing jade figurines found at La Venta:

> The deformations which the Olmecs practiced on their own bodies (whether actual or only symbolical) are more clearly visible in the figurines than in the stone monuments.
>
> The head was deformed by binding a small board in oblique position to the forehead of the newborn child until pressure gave the still-plastic cranium the desired form. Circular deformation was carried out also, and it has been suggested that the helmets on the colossal heads or on other

figurines represent molds used to produce deformation. One of the most characteristic traits is a cleft in the form of a V in the upper part of the head, which at times plainly becomes a hole. As this appears also in the figures of jaguars it may indicate the deep indention in the top of the skull of the animal. Formerly it was thought that this cleft on human figures represented the type of cranial deformation called *bilobé* which was believed to be practiced by some groups. But it has since been demonstrated that this deformation is anatomically impossible and could not have been practiced by the Olmecs or any other group.

The cleft, possibly representing some real feature, was transformed into a stylistic element which lost its significance even for its makers, although they continued to represent it over a long period in celts as well as in figurines. Teotihuacan II figurines at times show this trait. On the other hand, it does not appear at Monte Alban, in spite of the fact that many Olmec vestiges, particularly the jaguar, can be seen there. Thus I believe that if the cleft actually came into existence in representing the supraorbital cavities of the jaguar, the association was lost by the time the jaguar was represented at Monte Alban, where—if this animal is identical to the Olmec beast—it does not have the V-form cleft. The V cut sometimes is shown as a furrow crossing the head, as in a small sculpture found at El Tejar, but this site is outside the Metropolitan Olmec entity. On other figurines the heads are shaved or have only a roll of hair down the center.

Bernal's interesting comment on the V-form cleft as an imitationofthejaguarskullmayprovideanalternativeanswer to the worldwide practice of cranial deformation, though it appears that Bernal did not know that cranial deformation was so widespread.

Bernal mentions in a footnote that Michael Coe wrote to him in a personal letter: "This cleft has long puzzled me. I would now agree with you that it is a natural feature of the living jaguar, for on a recent visit to the Regent's Park and Washington zoos I have noted that on full-grown male jaguars there is a pronounced furrow on the top of the head, where the rather loose scalp has been almost folded over."

The idea that cranial deformation and the V-form cleft were disfigurement meant to make someone appear more jaguar-like does make some sense, at least for the Olmecs. It is known that they had a were-jaguar cult, wore jaguar masks, and otherwise saw the animal as symbol of power.

Also, the idea that some Olmecs actually had a deep V-form cleft in their heads is rather fantastic—and Bernal quickly dismisses the notion. But it seems that he is on to something. The V-form cleft would seem to be connected to the head binding and cranial deformation that the Olmecs found so popular.

Did the frowning parents of these babies actually make a deep V depression in the child's head and then bind it? If they did, would it have compressed an area of the brain that made them violent and war-like? Bernal actually mentions the subject, but then backs off. Were subcultures of the Olmecs trying to make themselves actually look like jaguars, with filed teeth, special facial scarring and tattoos, nose and ear piercings to add "jaguar appendages" and other embellishments to the body?

If you think this idea is too fantastic, I refer you to modern-day cat people such as Seattle resident Dennis Avner, known as the Catman, who has had a number of surgeries to make himself look like a cat. The *Seattle Times* reported on him on August 16, 2005 saying that Avner, "who goes by his Native American name, Stalking Cat, is known around the world as the

Catman. Over the past 25 years, Stalking Cat, 47, has received so many surgical and cosmetic procedures he's lost count. And he says all of them — from full-face tattoos to fanged dentures to steel implants for detachable 'whiskers'—have been done to achieve oneness with what he calls his totem, the tiger."

The acidic soil around the Gulf Coast Olmec areas has meant that few Olmec burials would preserve the skulls and other bones. So, most Olmec portraits of cranial deformation have come to us from statues and figurines. These indeed show that many of the Olmecs exhibited some sort of cranial deformation, and some of these showed a V-form cleft at the top of the head. Could these figurines actually depict real persons? Bernal, and most archeologists, think not.

Many strange and extremely elongated crania can be seen in museums along the desert coasts of Peru and Chile where they have been well preserved. None of these show a V-form cleft on the cranium. The V-form cleft figurines may possibly be representing the other version of cranial deformation where a child's head is bound in such a fashion as to flatten the head and widen it, which makes a small V at the top.

When discussing cranial deformation and were-jaguars it seems sensible to ask if the hallucinogenic mushroom trade had anything to do with these customs. Hallucinogenic mushroom rites are well known in Olmec culture, so the question arises, did the Olmec priests, presumably with cranial deformations, ingest magic mushrooms and then "become" were-jaguars in their altered state? It would seem that some sort of similar ritual scenario was going on over much of the Land of Olman.

Me and You and a Conehead Named Xax-Xoo

The strange world of cranial deformation gets more bizarre the more one researches the subject. One thing that has been brought to my attention recently is that the famous *moai* statures of Easter Island are also coneheads: most of the statues are clearly representing persons with elongated crania, like the Olmecs and ancient Peruvians.

In his 1969 book *More "Things"* zoologist and author Ivan T. Sanderson discussses a letter he received regarding an engineer who was stationed on the Aleutian island of Shemya during World War Two. While building an airstrip, his crew bulldozed a group of hills, discovering under

several sedimentary layers what appeared to be a graveyard of seemingly human remains, consisting of crania and long leg bones. The crania measured from 22 to 24 inches from base to crown. Such a large cranium would imply an immense size for a normally proportioned human, about twice the normal size. Furthermore, every skull was said to have been neatly trepanned!

Sanderson tried to gather further proof, eventually receiving a letter from another member of the unit who confirmed the report. The letters both indicated that the Smithsonian Institution had collected the remains, yet nothing further was heard. Sanderson seems to be convinced that it was not a hoax, but wondered why the Smithsonian would not release the data. To quote him, "…is it that these people cannot face rewriting all the text books?"

The details are sketchy, but one wonders if the skulls have been elongated, meaning they would be out of proportion to the rest of the remains. Other strange skulls, often elongated and sometimes with double rows of teeth, have been found in various parts of North America. In 1833, soldiers digging a pit for a powder magazine at Lompock Rancho, California, hacked their way through a layer of cemented gravel and came up with the skeleton of a man about twelve feet tall. The skeleton was surrounded by carved shells, huge stone axes, and blocks of porphyry covered with unintelligible symbols. The giant was also noteworthy in another respect: he had a double row of teeth, both upper and lower. When

local Indians began to attach a religious significance to the skeleton and artifacts, the authorities ordered it secretly buried, and it was lost to science.

In the 1880s, a number of strange discoveries in Minnesota mounds were published in the *Minnesota Geological Survey*, the St. Paul *Pioneer* and the St. Paul *Globe*. At Chatfield, Minnesota, six skeletons of enormous size were discovered. Similarly, at Clearwater, Minnesota, seven gigantic skeletons were uncovered in mounds. They were reported to be buried head down, and their skulls had receding foreheads and complete double dentition. The receding foreheads are characteristic of the "flatheads" and "coneheads."

The Serpent Priests of Malta

In a fascinating article published in *Hera* magazine (Rome, Italy) by Adriano Forgione it is mentioned that a number of dolichocephalous skulls were discovered in very ancient underground temples on the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Gozo. According to Forgione:

> It was known that until 1985 a number of skulls, found in pre-historic Maltese temples at Taxien, Ggantja and Hal Saflieni, were exposed in the Archeological Museum of Valletta. But since a few years ago, these were removed and placed in the deposits. From then, they were not to be seen by the public. Only the photographs taken by the Maltese researcher Dr. Anton Mifsud and his colleague, Dr. Charles Savona Ventura, remained to testify to the existence of the skulls and prove their abnormality. Books written by the two Maltese doctors, who since our first day in Malta helpfully provided us the necessary documentation for our research, illustrate a collection of skulls that show peculiar abnormalities and/ or pathologies. Sometimes inexistent cranial knitting lines, abnormally developed temporal partitions, drilled and swollen occupants as following recovered traumas, but above all, a strange, lengthened skull, bigger and more peculiar than the others, lacking of the median knitting. The presence of this finding leads to a number of possible hypotheses. The similitude with other similar skulls, from Egypt to South America, the particular deformity, unique in the panorama of medical pathology referred to in such distant times, (we are talking about approximately 3000 years before Christ) could be an exceptional discovery. Was that skull a result of ancient genetic mutation between different races that lived on that island?

This is an immensely interesting find—an elongated skull with no lines showing the plates of a human cranium? Forgione says that the islands of Malta and Gozo were very important centers since pre-historic times, places where medical cures were conducted, oracles were consulted and ritual encounters with the priests of the goddess took place. There existed many sanctuaries and thaumaturgic centers, where priests surrounded the healing goddess. Forgione maintains that it is well known that, in antiquity, the serpent was associated with the goddess and with healing capacities. The snake also belongs to the subterranean world. Therefore, a hypogeum dedicated to the goddess was the right place for a sacerdotal group that was defined, in all the most ancient cultures, as the “serpent priests.”

Says Forgione,

> Perhaps the skulls found in the hypogeum and examined during our visit to Malta, belonged indeed to these priests. As mentioned before, they present an accentuated dolichocephalous, which is particularly the center of our analysis. The long head and drawn features must have given a serpent-like appearance, stretching the eyes and skin. Lacking the lower part of the [skeleton], we can only speculate, but the hypothesis can’t be far from reality,.. .such deformities certainly created walking problems, forcing him to slither! The lack of the cranium’s median knitting and therefore, the impossibility of the brain’s consistent, radial expansion in the skullcap, [made it] so that it developed in the occipital zone of the cerebellum, deforming the cranium that looked like a single cap from the frontal and occipital area. This must have certainly caused the man terrible agony since infancy, but probably enhanced visions that were considered as being proof of a bond with the goddess.

Skulls from a Different Race?

The elongated skulls from Malta might present a different race from that of Homo sapiens. Forgione says, “Even the other skulls we examined presented strange anomalies. Some were more natural and harmonic than the cranium that mostly gained our attention, but they still presented a pronounced natural dolichocephalous and we could assume, without fear of refutation, that it is distinctive of an actual race, different to the native populations of Malta and Gozo.”

This possibility was confirmed by the Maltese archeologists themselves, Anthony Buonanno and Mark Anthony Mifsud, who told Forgione: “They are another race although C-14 or DNA exams haven’t yet been performed. Perhaps these individuals originated from Sicily.”

Continues Forgione,

> A fair part of the 7000 skeletons dug out of the Hal Saflieni hypogeum and examined by Themistocles Zammit in 1921, present artificially performed deformations. A skeleton of the group that was unburied by the archeologist, Brochtorff Circle, shows clear signs of intentional deformation through bondage. These deformations occurred for various reasons: initiations, matrimonies, solar rituals or punishments for social crimes or transgressions. All the tribal apparatus of incisions, perforations, partial or total removals, cauterizations, abrasions, insertions of extraneous bodies in muscles, like the modification of bodies for magical, medical or cosmetic purposes, were part of cruel practices in such, but ‘with best intention’ for the community. Why such persistence in tormenting one’s own body? Was there any connection between the tribal rituals and the men of the lengthened cranium? Could it be possible that, as in other cultures, successive populations tended to deform their infant’s heads in order to make them similar to this race of ‘serpent priests’? In Malta, all this was practiced by a mysterious populace that erected gigantic temples to the Mother Goddess between 4100 and 2500 B.C. The presence of these skulls might be that of the last exponents of the most ancient sacerdotal caste that built the megalithic temples and, never having blended with the local populations, had continued reproducing through the millenniums within familiar unions (as was the usual practice among the elite) and consequently impoverished its genetic patrimony until inevitable pathologies manifested, finally disappearing.

Forgione presents an extremely interesting scenario of the possible genesis of the deformation phenomenon. The megalithic ruins on Malta are recognized by mainstream scientists as the oldest in the world—what better place to look for the origins of a perplexing anthropological puzzle?

Other Deformation Fads

It is known that the practice of head binding had other offshoots such as the well-known foot binding performed by the Chinese until the 1940s in mainland China. Apparently the ancient (and modern) Chinese thought that women with small, deformed feet were sexier than women with normal feet; the practice was unfortunately quite common, especially for concubines and upper class women in the Mandarin Chinese society.

I lived as a rental houseguest with the Taiwanese Secretary of the Treasury back in 1976, a certain General Yi. His wife had had her feet bound in a relatively minor way, which kept her from being able to walk normally. Many of her toes were permanently folded over each other so that her feet could fit into extremely narrow and small shoes. Concubines whose feet had been completely bound and folded over were actually almost incapable of walking and had to be carried to their master's bed at night by servants for their weekly sexual trysts.

Somewhat similarly, the Mayans were known to think that cross-eyed women were sexier than those with a direct gaze. Therefore, the Mayans would suspend a small clay or stone ball on a string in front of an infant's eyes forcing her to stare at the suspended ball. Over a period of time the infant girl became permanently cross-eyed from this practice. Her head may well have been bound during this period as well.

So here we see how the purposeful deformation of the skull, feet and eyes can all be part of a culture's fetishes and curious notions of beauty.

Chinese Eunuchs and Head Binding

Eunuchs were employed throughout Africa, the Middle East and China right up until modern times. Chinese eunuchs often had all male genitalia removed and the eunuch urinated like a woman. In China and other countries, eunuchs were highly paid officials of the state, often the persons closest to the emperor. Admiral Zhang, the celebrated seaman who led the Chinese fleet to the New World as told in the bestseller 1421, was such a man.

Bernal also mentions Olmec eunuchs in his brief discussion of deformations in his book *The Olmec World.* Says Bernal:

> Another transformation of the face, this time only stylistically, consists of the man-jaguar, and many times the child-jaguar, association.

In this case human and feline features are combined; usually the mouth is the animal's and the other features are human.

I have already described the characteristics (perhaps real) of the bodies; although the latter were almost always masculine the genital organs were never carved, even though the figure was usually nude. I do not believe this to be the result of modesty; perhaps it had something to do with the curious insistence in Olmec art in representing pathological human figures. Perhaps the figures are of eunuchs. There are also figures of dwarfs and hunchbacks and quite realistic representations of sick persons, perhaps lepers, of cretins with thyroid deficiency, and of overweight people with glandular imbalance.

There is a strong case to be made that the reason many of the male Olmec statues lack any genitalia is that they are depictions of eunuchs! This would explain much of the strange behavior and adoration depicted in Olmec art. But why would the princes, priests or lords of the Olmecs be made into eunuchs? In China and the Middle East eunuchs were used as guards for the emperor's harem, as well as diplomats and messengers. It was widely believed that eunuch's, who would lack the normal male sex drive, were great teachers to young kings as well as highly trustworthy.

Could it be that the traditional frowning, elongated-cranium Olmec babies depicted in statuary (also lacking genitals) were, as Bernal guesses, eunuchs? Were the early Olmecs Shang Chinese administrators employing eunuchs? Why else would the Olmecs be castrating young babies? Would an isolated Olmec civilization have created eunuchs for the same reason as the Chinese: to create guards for a royal harem?

Modern archeologists are faced with the puzzle that is the Olmecs, and their strange looks and behavior. Olmec figurines give us a wide variety of head and body types that are curious by any historian's viewpoint.

Better Than a Hole in the Head

On a more practical note, one must acknowledge that the elongating deformation of skulls does almost double the size of the cranium and allow the brain to expand to a much larger size than would otherwise be possible. Does this mean that people with dolichocephalous crania had bigger brains and were therefore smarter or more psychic than humans with normal crania? It is an interesting thought, considering that we are often told by

researchers that we don’t use the full capacity of our brains anyway. Someone with a larger skull and larger brain may be making more use of his brain and therefore have an advantage over people with normal size brains.

Along these lines are questions concerning the curious holes often cut into skulls worldwide. The process of drilling or sawing holes in the skull is called “trepanning” and evidence of this has been found on elongated skulls as well as on normal skulls. Trepanning can result in a round hole in the skull or a square hole made with four saw cuts into the skull. That people survived this ancient “brain surgery” is evident since skulls have been found that show further calcium growth around the holes.

Again, the question is why?

The popular mainstream theory is that trepanning was a type of brain surgery performed on ancient people with mental problems. Cultures that employed these procedures believed that a person with a mental problem such as schizophrenia or “hearing voices” was possessed by evil spirits or

the like. By cutting a hole in the mentally ill person's head they could free the evil spirits that were causing the problem and the patient would hopefully get better.

On the other hand, there is the curious notion that a hole drilled in one's skull can actually enhance one's psychic abilities. As far as I know, this was first put forward in popular literature by the British author T. Lobsang Rampa in his 1960 book *The Third Eye.* In this book, the supposedly true account of the author's life as a doctor-in-training at a Tibetan monastery in the 1920s, Rampa reports that he had a hole drilled in his forehead while a young man to release his latent psychic powers.

The procedure was performed with a crude hand drill which cored out a two inch hole in his forehead. The hole was then plugged with a piece of special wood, and an herbal salve was placed over the entire area. Rampa describes it as a traumatic experience, but afterward he claims that he could more easily see patients' etheric auras, etc. While it is doubtful that *The Third Eye* is total non-fiction as the author maintains, it is nonetheless a fascinating story.

Such surgeries were performed in the 1960s in Britain and Holland by a small group of eccentrics who believed that by opening holes in the tops of their heads they would be permanently "high" and, theoretically, have enhanced psychic powers. British author John Michell chronicles some of these cases in his 1984 book *Eccentric Lives and Peculiar Notions* in a chapter entitled "The People with Holes in their Heads."

Michell says that the founder of the modern trepannation movement is a Dr. Bart Hughes from the Netherlands. Hughes made a discovery in 1962 that one's mental state and degree of consciousness are related to the volume of blood in the brain. According to his theory of evolution, the

adoption of an upright stance brought certain benefits to the human race, but it caused the brain to be partially starved of oxygen because of the effects of gravity and the difficulty of getting enough blood to the head. One can redress the balance by a number of methods, such as standing on one's head, jumping from a hot bath into a cold one, or the use of drugs; but the wider consciousness thus obtained is only temporary. Bart Hughes believed that a hole in his head would permanently increase blood to his brain and help counter the effects of gravity.

In 1965 a Londoner named Joseph Mellen met Bart Hughes on the Spanish resort island of Ibiza and quickly became Hughes leading (perhaps only) disciple. He too drilled a hole in his head and wrote an obscure book a few years later titled *Bore Hole*. Later, Mellen met another eccentric Londoner named Amanda Feilding who he began living with. She was impressed by Mellen and the hole in his head and decided to drill a hole in her own head. Feilding actually made a short film of her self-inflicted operation entitled *Heartbeat in the Brain.* In the film Feilding shaves her head and then drills a hole with an auger, blood spurting out as she penetrates the skull.

Despite the bizarreness of this modern trepanning story, both Mellen and Feilding continued their lives quite happily, and I can even say that I met both of them at a party in London some years ago and they both seemed quite "normal."

Olmecs, Extraterrestrials, and Atlantis

Mainstream archeologists have acknowledged in the last few years that the Olmecs are popular in the "ancient astronaut" field of speculation. When Ignacio Bernal was publishing the first overviews of the Olmecs in the late 1960s, the ancient astronaut hypothesis had not really entered pop culture. But soon, the gigantic African-looking heads were part of the hypothesis that some of the ancient gods were actually astronauts. Authors such as George Hunt Williamson, Robert Charroux, Erich von Daniken, Zechariah Sitchin and others have connected the ancient Sumerians (and others) with the Olmecs and extraterrestrials.

This theory largely maintains that "space aliens" came to our planet and helped shape ancient civilizations. These extraterrestrials naturally had elongated heads and oriental features (such as narrow, slanting eyes, often

called by anthropologists “coffeebean eyes”) and did not artificially create elongated skulls.

Statues and other figurines found at ancient Sumerian sites in Iraq indicate that some of the inhabitants of the area had elongated heads and the puffy, slit-like “coffeebean” eyes. Such figurines are thought to give the impression of a reptilian countenance, and are today called by archeologists “serpent priests” or “lizard” figurines. Were they humans or extraterrestrials?

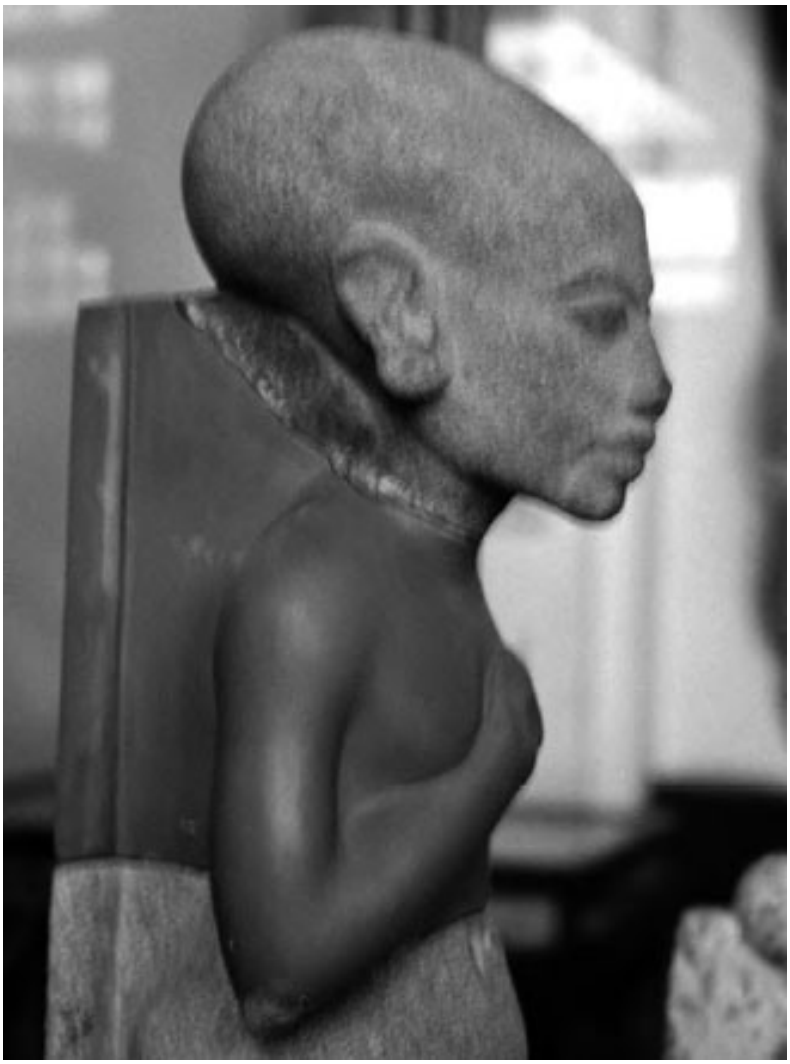
In the extraterrestrial theory, the ETs were the overlords of the primitive Earth populations (which were possibly genetically engineered by them) and were highly admired by the humans that were their subjects. As these extraterrestrials returned to their own planet, the humans left in charge decided to emulate the aliens who had elongated heads and looked distinctly different from normal humans. Therefore, the ruling elite of the humans came upon the practice of skull deformation in order to try to look like the extraterrestrial masters who had once ruled them.

A similar theory on the Olmecs and their cranial deformation is that they are remnants of the outposts of the lost continent of Atlantis. In this theory, Atlanteans, for reasons unknown, liked to have long, conical shaped skulls, perhaps for psychic power. Atlantis was composed of many different races, as well, much like the United States and Olman.

It is thought that Atlanteans in their worldwide journeys impressed other cultures with their high level of civilization and knowledge of all things psychic and scientific, and that the colonies of the Atlanteans, such as those in Mexico, Peru and Egypt, began to imitate the Atlanteans and their unusual customs such as head binding.

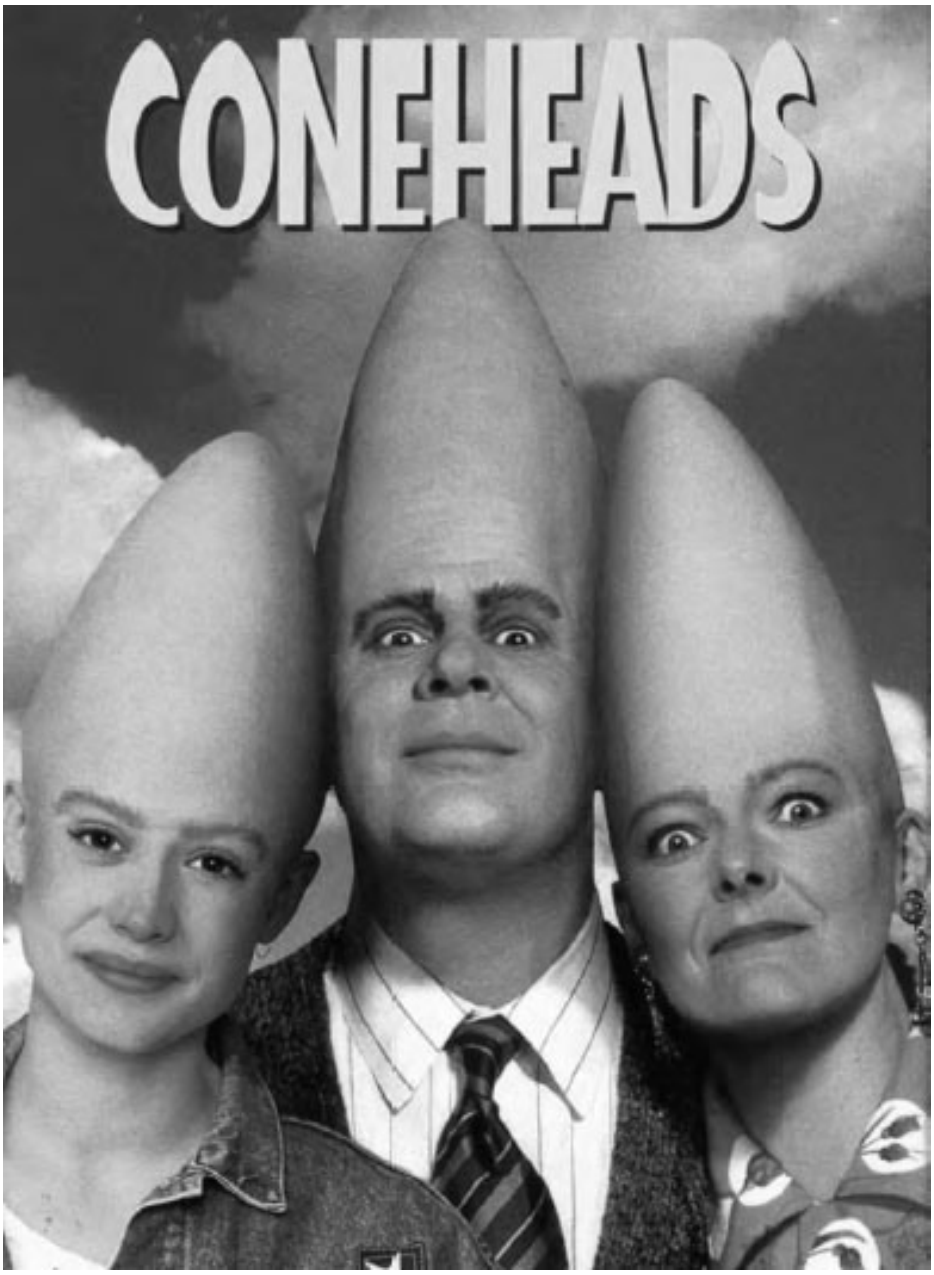
This would help to explain why cranial deformation is so widespread. As we have seen, it can be found in ancient Sumeria, among the “Watchers” of Kurdistan, and among certain of the Egyptian royalty. This also fits in with the theories that the Olmecs and the Tiahuanaco culture of Lake Titicaca and the altiplano of Peru (who also practiced head binding) were aligned with the remnants of the Atlantean civilization, sometimes called the Atlantean League. One of the hallmarks of these ancient sea-kings is the wearing of the turban, which in itself is associated with head binding. Indeed, are turbans the final modern remains of the ancient practice of head binding?

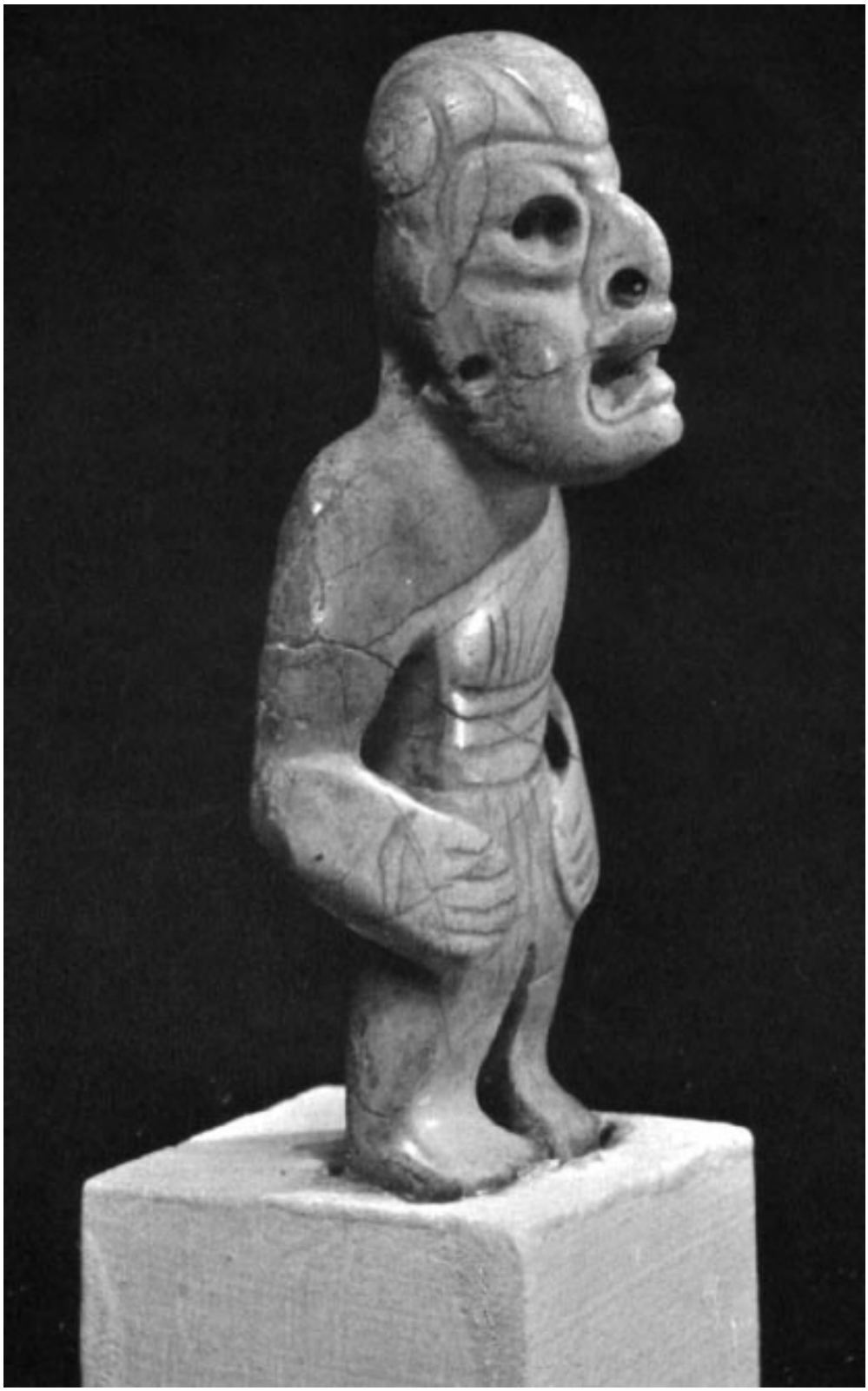
Olmec ceramic figure with extended cranium, from Las Bocas, Mexcio, now in the Museum of the American Indian, New York.



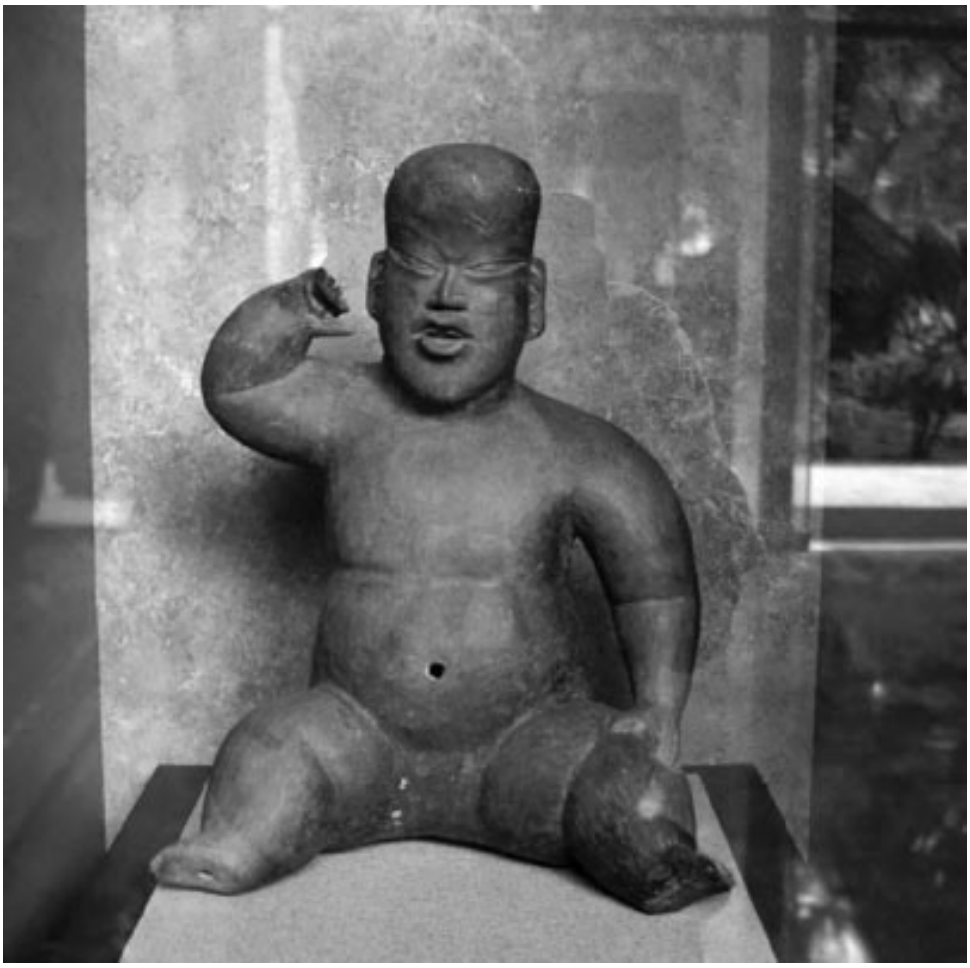
Above: A statue of the Egyptian king Tutankhamen from his tomb. Note the elongated head.
Opposite Page: Two views of the bust of one of the daughters of Akhenaton and Nefertiti. Both statues are currently in the Egyptian National Museum in Cairo.

Left: Dennis Avner, the Cat Man. Below: *Coneheads*, the movie.


CONEHEADS

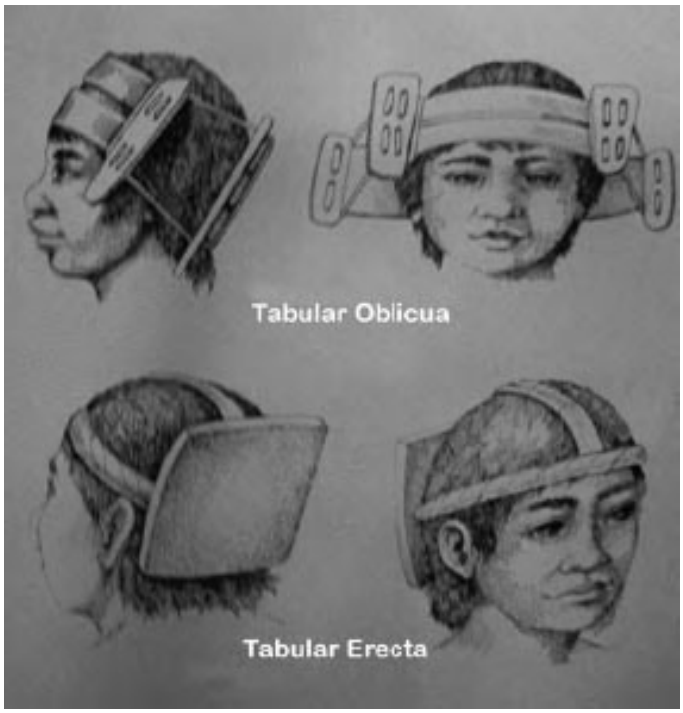


Jade figurine from La Venta known as Offering 3. It seems to show cranial deformation, piercing, facial and body scaring plus tattooing.



Olmec eunuch baby ceramic on display at the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City.

Chinook woman and child, a typical “Flathead” of the Pacific Northwest, of which Flathead Lake, Montana, gets its name. Note the woman’s very small feet, as well. She also has tattoos on her face and body that seem to be some sort of script.



Top: Method of head binding as shown at the museum at Cuicuilco. Bottom: Elongated skull in the museum at Ica,Peru.

Olmec jade maskette with the curious V-form cleft.

Above: Chart of the curious V-form cleft and were-jaguar face. Right: Monument from San Martin Pajapan with curious double mask and V-form cleft.

The famous “Uncle Sam” monument from La Venta showing an Olmec with what seems to be a false beard, as the Egyptians sometimes wore. He also wears a gold ball in his nose.

Above and Opposite Page: Mangbetu women and child with bound head from the former Belgian Congo. Photos taken circa 1920.

Left and below: Olmec elongated skulls on display at the Anthropology Museum in Xalapa.

Jade celt from La Venta with the curious V-form cleft.

Olmec ceremonial axe carved from green serpentine. It includes the trademark frown and the curious V-form cleft.

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6.

THE MYSTERY OF OLMEC WRITING

§§§

Many elements of Maya art are foreshadowed in the Izapa style, which flourished in southern Guatemala around the beginning of the Christian era. Writing and the complicated Calendar Round were in use here several centuries prior to their appearance in the lowland Maya area.
—Betty J. Meggers,
Prehistoric America (1972)

The Mystery of Olmec Hieroglyphs

The question of writing in the Americas has always been controversial. Writing was unknown in South America according to most archeologists. Why they think the ancient Peruvians were able to build superbly engineered megalithic buildings and walls, but for some reason never invented writing is interesting to ponder.

Writing of various forms was used in North America, however, and the oldest writing is thought to be Olmec. Epi-Olmec script (Post Olmec script) is also known as Isthmian script. Because of the long inscription on the La Mojarra Stela 1, it is sometimes referred to as La Mojarra script. It is now known to go back to at least 650 BC.

The undeciphered script of the Olmecs may have been invented independently by them—or did it come from some earlier civilization? Was it a heritage of an even more ancient and fantastic world? A world across the ocean?

The earliest of Olmec glyphs go back to 1000 BC or before, but these are not in the form of a text. No codex books of the Olmec are known to exist. Only four Mayan codex books survived the Conquest.

Says Ignacio Bernal in his brief discussion of Olmec writing in *The Olmec World:*

In the Olmec area there are some other inscriptions that, while they are not calendrical, do have glyphs, showing the use of a type of writing. Thus, on Monument 13 from La Venta can be seen various hieroglyphs, among them one representing a foot, a glyph which was to be repeated in later epochs. The personage on Monument 10 of San Lorenzo displays a glyph on his chest. In other sculptures there are characters that also function as glyphs, for example the X that represent spots on the jaguar's skin. In the same way a part of the jaguar, the claw or the mouth, represents the whole animal. This convention was to become common in Mesoamerican writing.

Other elements are only decorative, but some seem to have been hieroglyphs since that early period, for we find them fulfilling this function in Olmecoid or later cultures. For example, the V with twisted points becomes Glyph C in Monte Alban. Drucker has suggested that the Olmecs originated glyphs that the Maya were later to elaborate on, for instance, the squares with rounded corners, generally empty when they are Olmec but filled with motifs in Maya art.

All these data undoubtedly point to the existence of writing in the Olmec area, as well as the existence of a calendar which was the Mesoamerican prototype.

Monument 13 from La Venta has perhaps the earliest hieroglyphs in the Americas. This monument features a bearded man wearing a turban and a waist sash. He is holding a banner or scythe in his left hand. There is the hieroglyph of a foot behind the man and in front of him are three hieroglyphs: the top one is a circle, that perhaps was to be filled in but never was. The middle glyph looks like Mickey Mouse, and the bottom glyph seems to be a bird's head, probably a macaw or parrot. These three glyphs probably form this man's name.

Curiously, Monument 13 from La Venta is often not discussed in books about the Olmecs. I could find no reference to it at all in Diehl's book, *The Olmecs,* or in David C. Grove's book *Chalcatzingo.* This seems rather curious since it was found at La Venta and may contain the earliest hieroglyphs of the Olmecs and all of Mesoamerica. Do they not discuss Monument 13 because the figure is decidedly of curious racial features? While we have come to associate the Olmecs as looking like Africans and Chinese, this man looks quite different. He seems to be more Mediterranean

in appearance, with a thick beard and mustache, something like a Phoenician or Libyan sailor. He is clear evidence of the cosmopolitan nature of the Olmecs—they could look like Africans, Phoenicians, Chinese or American Indians. Statues or figurines from the same archeological site often display distinctly different facial features and clothing, contrasting markedly with one another.

Archeologists believe that the Olmecs used simple hieroglyphs for hundreds of years and eventually these hieroglyphs developed into a common written form called Epi-Olmec script. Different from Mayan script, though similar, Epi-Olmec script and the earlier Olmec hieroglyphs, have baffled archeologists for decades. While there are odd characters and glyphs of Epi-Olmec script on jade items and stone statues, there are not very many actual texts that are known to be written in this ancient script.

Epi-Olmec is thought to have lasted until around 500-300 BC. It is around 300 BC that Mayan script is thought to have begun. There are four important Epi-Olmec scripts, each quite extensive: La Mojarra Stela 1; The Tuxtla Statuette; Tres Zapotes Stela C; and a Teotihuacan-style mask (that is currently in a private collection).

The Tuxtla Statuette and Epi-Olmec Script

The important Tuxtla Statuette was discovered in 1902 by a farmer plowing his field near La Mojarra in the west foothills of the Tuxtlas mountains in Veracruz state. The Tuxtlas mountains are also the site of the quarry where stone was cut to make the famous colossal heads. Because of the script on the statue, it was sold through the black market and reputedly smuggled into New York hidden in a shipment of tobacco leaf. The Smithsonian Institution acquired it shortly thereafter for an undisclosed sum.

The Tuxtla Statuette is a small 6 inch (16 cm) rounded piece of nephrite (greenstone, similar to jade, though not quite as hard), carved to resemble a squat, bullet-shaped human with a duck bill and wings. It has *75* glyphs incised around it in the Epi-Olmec script. The Tuxtla Statuette is one of only a few extant examples of this writing system, and as such is invaluable.

The human head carved from the stone is bald, and seems to have oriental eyes and large round earplugs. The most remarkable feature is that,

instead of a mouth, the statuette has a long bill that extends down to the chest. This bill has been identified as belonging to the boat-billed heron, a locally abundant bird along the Tabasco and southern Veracruz Gulf Coast. The wings or wing-like cape envelop the body and feet have been incised into the base. One might call this statue the “winged, duck-billed Olmec.” Olmecs are sometimes depicted as flying, and such figures are typically known as “flying Olmecs.”

The Tuxtla Statuette is also notable in that its glyphs include the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar date of March 162 AD, which in 1902 was the oldest Long Count date yet discovered. The American archeologist and epigrapher Sylvanus Morley has suggested, as have others, that the date was inscribed some time after the statuette was created. Therefore the statue may be from 500 BC or earlier.

The Tuxtla Statuette is now held at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington DC as part of the greater Smithsonian collection. One wonders if the Epi-Omec script on the statuette is some sort of charm or magical incantation. Another curious item in the Smithsonian Dumbarton Oaks collection is the Izapa-style pectoral showing a seated figure with a hieroglyphic text. This Mayan pectoral may be engraved with “protective prayers” or other magical incantations. Was the Tuxtla Statuette a magical talisman carried by the owner for protection?

Since the discovery of the Tuxtla Statuette, other Epi-Olmec glyphs have been found, such as those on four badly weathered stelae at Cerro de las Mesas in Veracruz State. Cerro de Las Mesas is thought to have been an Olmec site, and the site contains hundreds of artificial mounds, many grouped around a man-made lagoon. A number of stelae have been found in the district which contain instances of Epi-Olmec script.

There is also a series of glyphs on a pottery sherd from Chiapa de Corzo, the indigenous capital of Chiapas. Here a Long Count date of 36 BC was inscribed on the sherd, plus some Epi-Olmec glyphs. The Olmec system of numbers, and presumably their calendar, was the same as the one the Mayans used.

ItwasannouncedinI997byarcheologist-epigraphersJohn S. Justeson and Terrence Kaufman that they had discovered a column in the hieroglyphic text on La Mojarra Stela 1. The badly weathered column of hieroglyphs was discovered in November 1995 on the side of Stela 1 from La Mojarra in

southern Veracruz, Mexico. Justeson and Kaufman claim that most of the signs in this column have now been identified by nighttime examination under artificial lighting, making possible a nearly complete transcription and translation of this column. This data expands the modest corpus of Epi-Olmec hieroglyphic texts and confirms various aspects of the decipherment of the Epi-Olmec script, they said.

Justeson and Kaufman claimed that, with the help of the new the hieroglyphic text on Stela 1, they had deciphered Epi-Olmec script and in their 1997 paper, they put forward a decipherment of Isthmian, placing it within the Mixe-Zoquean language family.

However, the following year, their interpretation was disputed by Stephen Houston and Michael D. Coe. They unsuccessfully applied Justeson and Kaufman's decipherment system against the "O'Boyle mask," or "Teo Mask," a stone mask in a private collection of unknown provenance.

There are approximately 23 glyphs on the "O'Boyle mask," a stone mask said to be a Teotihuacan-style mask. There seems to be no doubt that the mask and the glyphs are authentic. But what the glyphs say, as has been the case with all Olmec and Epi-Olmec writings, is a mystery.

According to a report in the *Deseret News* on January 26, 2004, Brigham Young University archaeologist Stephen Houston and his colleague from Yale University, Michael D. Coe, said their study of the "Teo Mask" disproves earlier claims that the language had been cracked by Justeson and Kaufman.

Says the article:

> Two researchers—John S. Justeson of the State University of New York, Albany, andTerrenceKauf man of the University of Pittsburgh, both anthropology professors claimed in the journal *Science* that they ad deciphered that written language.
>
> Kaufman and Justeson call the writing "epi-Olmec script." However, Houston and Coe term it "Isthmian" because it was written by people who lived on and around Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec. They date to within five centuries before and after A.D. 1. Kaufman and Justeson said they had deciphered the writings based on semantic clues associated with

known cultural practices and a similarity of the hieroglyphs to other writings in the region that had been deciphered.

They claimed to be able to read the earliest writings known from North America, inscriptions on large stone carvings called stela found in Veracruz, Mexico. The dates on the stones, they added, were AD 159 and AD 162.

The announcement made international headlines. But Houston and Coe doubt anyone can read the script. …They write in their new paper that Justeson and Kaufman are respected scholars, but they disagree that the writings have been deciphered.

The writing is “immensely complex. That is, it’s very well developed with a large number of signs,” Houston told the *Deseret Morning News*.

If it really were readable,” he said, “it would open the window to a big chunk of the past.”

The mask turned up about 15 years ago. Its extensive number of symbols means it is an important addition to the tiny canon of writings in the script. In a private collection, the mask was brought to the attention of Houston and Coe by a colleague of theirs.

“It’s one of the very few well-preserved examples that’s ever come to light of this writing system,” Houston said.

The find allowed scientists to check the supposed meaning of hieroglyphs as published by Justeson and Kaufman. Coe has outlined factors that need to be in place before a persuasive decipherment can be made of an ancient written language. Some sort of parallel script should be available from a language that has been deciphered. The unknown script should represent a language that is well-understood, with cross-ties to imagery that allow scientists to check the meanings.

“The fact of the matter is, that none of these were in place for this proposed decipherment,” Houston said.

A huge problem, as he sees it, is that few examples of this writing system are known. Writings by the Maya may number 10,000 examples. With this script, however, the number may be just over 10, he said.

When the mask became available, it presented a new opportunity to evaluate Kaufman and Justeson’s claims.

“Mike and I diligently plugged in the values” that were cited for the hieroglyphs in the earlier research, he said. The results? The message would be an odd series of words like “Blood… mouth… take he take…”

Houston and Coe write in their paper that the “decipherment” carried out on the mask’s symbols “tells us nothing new, unexpected or even expected about this Isthmian text and the mask that displays it. Instead, the inserted values yield a semantic mishmash.”

Justeson’s and Kaufman’s purported decipherment “is, in our view, unlikely to be valid,” they concluded.

Despite repeated attempts to reach them by telephone and e-mail, Justeson and Kaufman did not agree to an interview.

But Justeson sent a one-sentence comment by e-mail concerning Houston and Coe’s study: “Their arguments against our methods and results are easily answered, and we will answer them in an appropriate scientific outlet.” The statement is signed by both Justeson and Kaufman.

Houston said the definite way in which the original findings were posted hampered scientific discussion. It “has made it more difficult to discuss, because now it has become an uglier issue, disagreeing with these two fellows,” he said.

“I really believe, on our present evidence, it’s impossible to decipher this writing system,” Houston said. “We just don’t have the elements in place to make it happen.”

The claim of the decipherment of Epi-Olmec seems to have been the only reason that this otherwise obscure mask has now been seen by the public. This whole episode, revolving around one of the few artifacts in the world with Epi-Olmec script on it, indicates how many such artifacts may be still be hidden in private collections—their important contribution to knowledge about the Olmecs might never be realized.

Kaufman and Justeson’s claims still remain unverified, though the battle continues in monographs and emails among those who find these small issues important.

Indeed, in the bigger picture, it may be fine that Epi-Olmec is in the range of the Mixe-Zoquean language family, but what does that tell us? Where did the script originate? Did it come from Shang China? Was it

invented independently by the Olmecs? Did it have some connection to Phoenician or other languages such as those found at Comalcalco?

Zapotec, Epi-Omec and Mayan Script

Early Olmec hieroglyphs and the subsequent Epi-Olmec script have made modern archeologists look hard at where writing actually originated in North America. The debate continues today, although some very recent developments (covered later in this chapter) sheds new light on the subject. Even though Epi-Olmec script has only been studied carefully for the last 20 years, most archeologist believe that the first writing was early Olmec hieroglyphs such as those seen as Monument 13 at La Venta.

The Mayan and Epi-Olmec may have split early on, and certainty the Mayan writing system has been the most enduring of all the systems. By 200 BC there were at least three major writing systems, Zapotec, Epi-Olmec and Maya. By the Classic Period of Mesoamerica (300-900 AD) there were even more writing systems, most of them derived from Zapotec, such as Teotihuacano, Ñuiñe, Xochicalco, Mixtec, Mixteca-Puebla, and Aztec. It is generally accepted that all Mesoamerican writing systems can be divided into two groups: Southeastern and Oaxacan. The Southeastern group includes the Maya and Epi-Olmec scripts.

Epigrapher Lawrence Lo, a San Francisco software engineer, who runs the web site called Ancientscripts.com, says this about Epi-Olmec script:

> Little is known about [Epi-Olmec], as this system is currently in the early stages of decipherment. What one can say, though, is that it is definitely a logophonetic system, employing both phonetic and logographic signs, and represents an ancient language in the Mixe-Zoquean family. It also uses the Long Count to date important events, and assuming that the Epi-Olmec Long Count has a similar start date as the Maya Long Count, the range of Epi-Olmec Long Count dates range from the 1st century BCE to the 6th century CE, although it is likely that it began much earlier.
>
> …Justeson and Kaufman proposed that the language this script recorded was pre-proto-Zoquean, which belongs to a small language family called Mixe-Zoquean. This family is still spoken today around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Why Mixe-Zoquean? Why not Mayan, or any other family for that matter? Well, it has been theorized that speakers of Mixe-Zoquean languages have stayed near the Isthmus of Tehuantepec since the Pre-Classic, and many modern Mixe-Zoquean languages are still spoken in this area. Secondly, there are a lot of Mixe-Zoquean loanwords in other Mesoamerican languages, such as pom, or copal incense, a very important component of any ritual (even today), and kakawa, or cacao beans, used for preparing ritual drinks as well as currency. It is likely that the Olmecs spoke a Mixe-Zoquean language, because the environmental requirements of these plants match that of Gulf Coast Mexico. Kaufman argued that as the Olmecs transmitted their rituals, words related to these rituals also diffused. And it is also likely the people who subsequently inhabited the same geographical area as the Olmecs were descendants of the Olmecs and spoke a Mixe-Zoquean tongue. And therefore their writing system would therefore record a Mixe-Zoquean language.

Well, this isn't truly an impeccable model. There is still not enough information to argue that there wasn't an influx of people into the Isthmus and thus replacing earlier inhabitants. Also, the fundamental assumption that the Olmec spoke a Mixe-Zoquean language is still debatable. In fact, the correctness of the Justeson/Kaufman decipherment was thrown into doubt with the discovery of a new mask. When veteran epigraphers Stephen Houston and Michael Coe plugged the values proposed by Justeson and Kaufman into the texts on the mask, they found the reading far from satisfactory.

The Oaxacan site of Monte Alban, a city perched on top of mountain (which had its top completely leveled in a gigantic earthwork project, apparently by the Olmecs) is a site of both Zapotec and Olmec activity. Early Olmec glyphs and numerals have been found there, and it would make sense that Zapotec was inherited from the early Olmec language and script. For some time, it was debated whether the Zapotecs or Olmecs were the originators of Mesoamerican script. Fortunately, new discoveries concerning Olmec and Epi-Olmec script continue to happen almost yearly.

Earliest Olmec Writing Dated to 900 BC

The date for the earliest Olmec writing was pushed back by hundreds of years when archaeologists digging near Veracruz on Mexico's Gulf Coast discovered the earliest-known example of writing in the New World. This

discovery set the date for the appearance of this crucial cultural implement back by at least 350 years to about 650 BC, it was announced at the time.

This discovery was featured in an article in the Dec. 6, 2002, Los Angeles *Times* which said, “More important, the discovery of an inscribed seal and fragments from a plaque suggests that writing was developed by the Olmec civilization and not by the Zapotec, source of the earliest previously known writing, or the Maya, who brought it to its greatest level of sophistication… The new find provides support for the controversial idea of a ‘mother culture,’ that the Olmec developed most of the concepts and passed them on to succeeding civilizations in much the same way that the Greeks developed European culture.”

However, this 650 BC date was pushed back even farther when it was announced the plaque was actually hundreds of years older. It was discovered in 1999 when workers in a Mexican quarry turned up a five-inch-thick stone slab with unusual incisions on its face and realized they had something unusual on their hands. They contacted local archaeologists, who named it the Cascajal block after a village near the discovery site, and kept it in relative obscurity in the Mexican state of Veracruz.

In March of 2006 Stephen Houston, Professor of Anthropology at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island,and his team got wind of it. He and several archaeologists from other universities traveled to Veracruz and were thrilled to discover that they were dealing with

the Western Hemisphere’s oldest known writing sample.

The articles says that by analyzing ceramic shards and clay figurines dug out of the same quarry, the scholars dated the tablet to about 900 BC, making it roughly 3,000 years old. That predates by four centuries what was then believed to be the hemisphere’s oldest writing and scholars now believe the Cascajal block was carved by the Olmecs.

The Cascajal slab is a rectangular tablet about the size of a legal sheet of paper, 5 inches (13 centimeters) thick and weighs a hefty 25 pounds (12 kilograms). The plaque contains 62 characters, 28 of them unique. Some resemble vegetables, flowers, clamshells or insects, while others seem to depict geometric shapes such as abstract boxes or blobs.

The tablet’s 62 symbols are arranged in horizontal rows— unusual for Mesoamerican scripts, which typically use vertical rows. They are grouped

into pairs and meandering strings up to ten symbols long.

According to a press release about the same plaque from the *National Geographic News Service* on September 14, 2006:

> The tablet, dated to 900 B.C., came from an ancient mound, where local workers were scavenging stones to build a nearby road. When the workers found the tablet in 1999, the owner of the land could tell that the stone was special, Houston says.
>
> The owner alerted local authorities, who called in two archaeologists, Maria del Carmen Rodriguez Martinez of Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History and Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos of Veracruz University.
>
> With the help of Brown University's Houston and four other archaeologists, the team analyzed the tablet and its writings. The researchers looked at the tablet's patina—the coating of chemicals that forms on surfaces as they age. The scientists also examined pottery found in the same mound as the tablet.
>
> Most of the artifacts date to around 1200 to 900 B.C., when the Olmecs were at the height of their influence.
>
> Several neighboring cultures later developed their own writing systems, but until now no one had ever found Olmec writing.
>
> "It's been this black hole," said Karl Taube, an archaeologist at the University of California, Riverside, who also worked on the tablet. "There's this incredibly developed civilization that had contact with the rest of Mesoamerica and a huge economic base," Taube said. "But where was the writing?"
>
> Jewelry, figurines, and a few pieces of ceramic had isolated symbols that might have been Olmec writing. But the tablet is the first clear sign this culture had a script. The script draws from the culture's "iconography"—meaningful symbols and stylized drawings that adorn monuments and figurines in the area.
>
> "All the imagery really smacks strongly of Olmec," Taube said.
>
> … ArchaeologistChristopher Pool of the University of Kentucky in Lexington has known about the tablet for a couple years.
>
> "I've always been a little skeptical of it," Pool said.

> “For one, it’s unique,” he continued. Another critical issue, Pool adds, is that when Rodriguez and Ortiz got the tablet, it was already removed from the ground, taking it out of its original archaeological context.
>
> But Brown University’s Houston hopes the discovery will bring more attention to the area, driving the discovery of more examples of the script.
>
> Archaeologist Mary Pohl of Florida State University in Tallahassee agrees.
>
> The tablet is a “great discovery,” she said. “I suspect there will be more coming.”

All this excitement over the Cascajal block helps give the Olmecs another 15 minutes of fame in the mainstream media. Being dated to 900 BC really shows us that Olmec writing has been around for thousands of years and there must have been much, much more of it that is either forever lost, or still waiting to be found.

As Mary Pohl says, there are likely to more discoveries adding to the knowledge of Olmec writing, including the probable discovery of even older Olmec texts, perhaps some going back to 1100 BC.

Ancient Shang Chinese Characters—the Final Solution?

New discoveries and announcement about Olmec hieroglyphs and script will no doubt be forthcoming over the next decade. Yet, perhaps the most important announcement has already occurred.

According to Chinese scholars the Chinese “invention” of eunuchs goes back to the Shang Dynasty (1600-1028 BC). What also goes back to the Shang Dynasty is the invention of writing, at least as far as the Chinese are concerned. The earliest Chinese characters are found on Shang Chinese oracle bones. These characters are similar to early Olmec characters.

In a *US News & World Report* story published November 4, 1996, it was reported that a Chinese language scholar named Han Ping Chen examined the famous Olmec figures and accompanying jade celts found at La Venta which is now at the National Museum of Anthropology. According to the news magazine he declared after examining some “writing” on the celts that, “Clearly, these are Chinese characters.”

Says the article:

For diffusionists, Olmec art offers a tempting arena for speculation. Carbon-dating places the Olmec era between 1000 and 1200 BC, coinciding with the Shang dynasty's fall in China. American archaeologists unearthed the group sculpture in 1955. Looking at the sculpture displayed in the National Gallery, as well as other Olmec pieces, some Mexican and American scholars have been struck by the resemblances to Chinese artifacts. In fact, archaeologists initially labeled the first Olmec figures found at the turn of the century as Chinese. Migrations from Asia over the land bridge 10,000 - 15,000 years ago could account for the Chinese features, such as slanted eyes, but not for the stylized mouths and postures peculiar to sophisticated Chinese art that emerged in recent millennia.

Yet, until Chenmade his pilgrimage to the museum, no Shang specialist had ever studied the Olmec. The scholar emerged from the exhibit with a theory. After the Shang army was routed and the emperor killed, he suggested, some loyalists might have sailed down the Yellow River and taken to the ocean. There, perhaps, they drifted with a current which skirts Japan's coast, heads for California and peters out near Ecuador. Betty Meggers, a senior Smithsonian archaeologist who has linked Ecuadorian pottery to 5,000 year old ship wrecked Japanese pottery, says such an idea is "plausible" because ancient Asian mariners were far more proficient than given credit for.

But Chen's identification of the celt markings sharpens the controversy over origins even further. For example, Mesoamericanist Michael Coe at Yale University labels Chen's search for Chinese characters as insulting to the indigenous people of Mexico. There are only about a dozen experts worldwide in the Shang script, which is largely unrecognizable to readers of modern Chinese. When Prof. Mike Xu, a professor of Chinese history at the University of Central Oklahoma, traveled to Beijing to ask Chen to examine his index of 146 markings from pre-Columbian objects, Chen refused, saying he had no interest in anything outside China. He relented only after a colleague familiar with Xu's work insisted that Chen, as China's leading authority, take a look. He did and found that all but three of Xu's markings could have come from China.

> Xu was at Chen's side in the National Gallery when the Shang scholar read the text on the Olmec celt in Chinese and translated: "The ruler and his chieftains establish the foundation for a kingdom." Chen located each of the characters on the celt in three well-worn Chinese dictionaries he had with him. Two adjacent characters are usually read as "master and subjects," but Chen decided that in this context they might mean "ruler and his chieftains." The character on the line below he recognized as the symbol for "kingdom" or "country"—two peaks for hills, a curving line underneath for river. The next character, Chen said, suggests a bird but means "waterfall" completing the description. The bottom character he read as "foundation" or "establish," implying the act of founding something important. If Chen is right, the celts not only offer the earliest writing in the New World, but mark the birth of a Chinese settlement more than 3,000 years ago.

Betty Meggers of the Smithsonian Institution is quoted as saying, "Writing systems are too arbitrary and complex. They cannot be independently reinvented."

The article ends by saying that more than 5,000 Shang characters have survived even though the soldiers who defeated the Shang forces murdered the scholars and burned or buried any object with writing on it. In a recent excavation in the Shang capital of Anyang, archaeologists have found a buried library of turtle shells covered with characters. And at the entrance lay the skeleton of the librarian, stabbed in the back and clutching some writings to his breast.

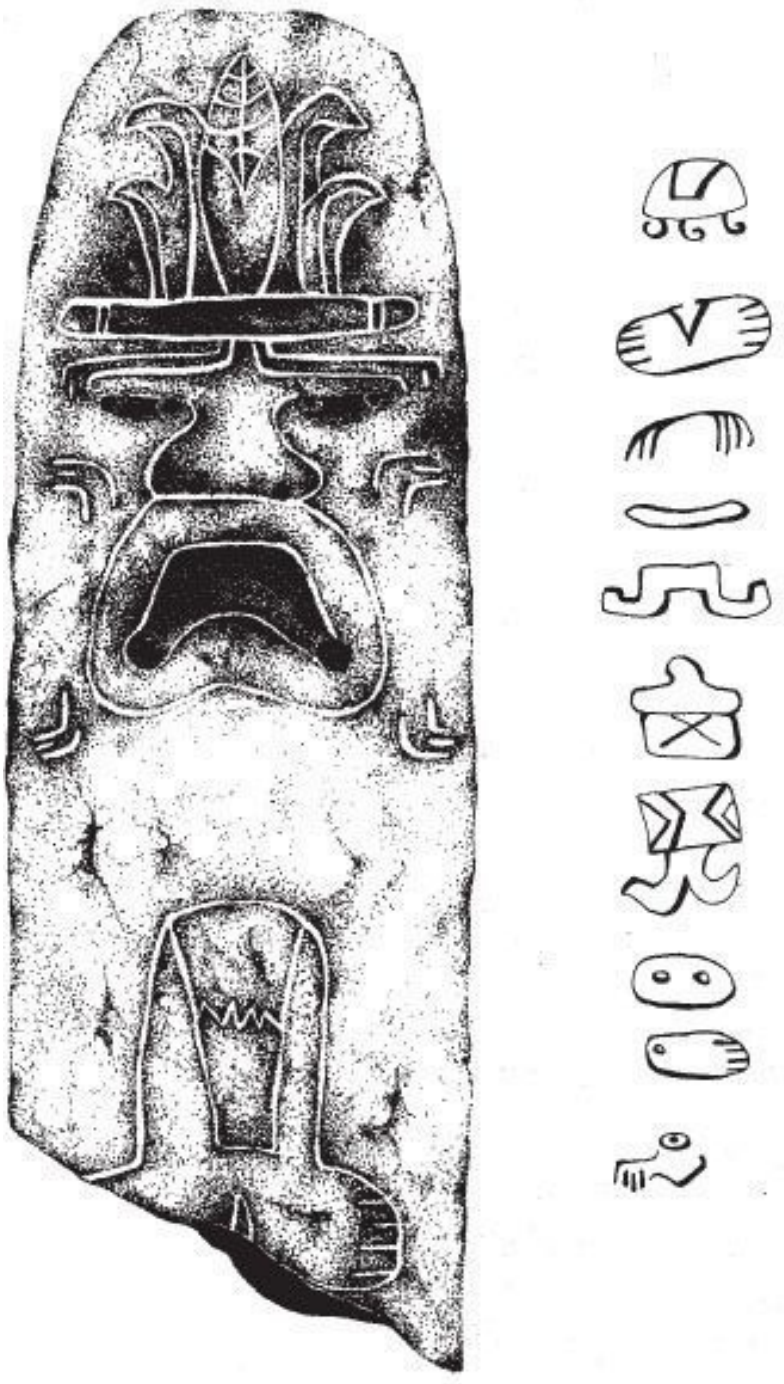
Since the Olmec figurines and celts were buried in a special arrangement under white sand topped with alternate layers of brown and reddish-brown sand, Chen thinks that perhaps it was hidden to save it from the kind of rage that sought to wipe out the Shang and their memory.

It is curious to think that the rise of the Olmec civilization may have had something to do with the collapse of the capital back in China. The fortunes of many far-flung colonies would have been tied to events in the motherland. It would be an interesting course of study to review what we currently consider the "mysterious" rise and fall of certain civilizations to see if we can find correlations with the fortunes of cultures that have been heretofore considered unrelated.

So, it is possible that the collapse of the Shang civilization may have cut off the yearly visit of ships to Pacific ports that were part of the Land of Olman. The Olmecs used the early Shang oracle script for a time, but this evolved on its own and later became Epi-Olmec script and possibly Mayan script. Areas like Comacalco were literal university campuses where ancient seafarers and locals alike learned different languages.

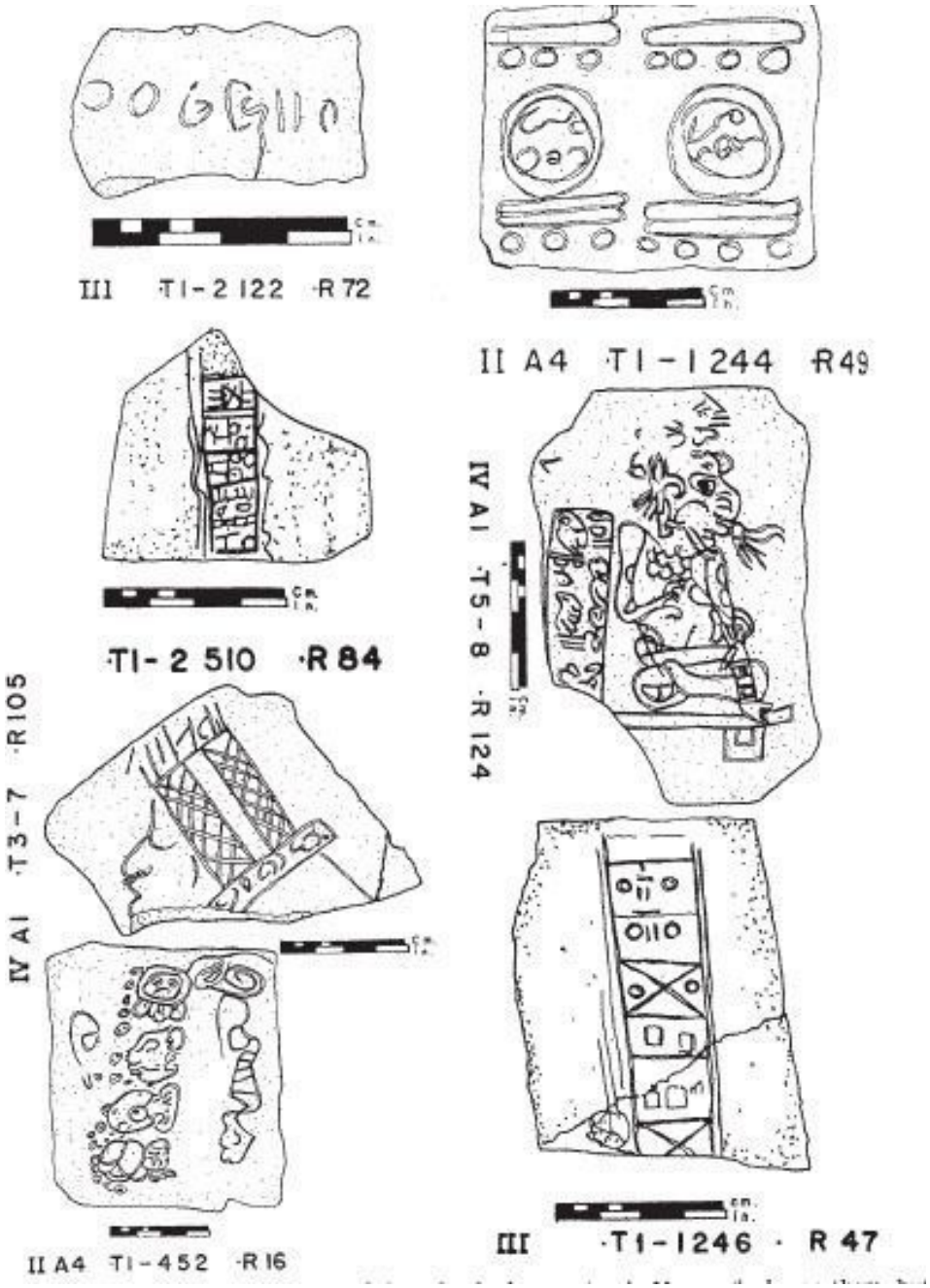
By this time, Mayan was the dominant language on the Atlantic coast, while Zapotec became the dominant language inland and along the Pacific Coast. The exception to this would be Izapa and locations along the Pacific coast of Guatemala, which are of the Mayan sphere of influence.

So we see that, eventually as time went on, the Land of Olman became many lands, and the script and language of Olman became many scripts and many languages.



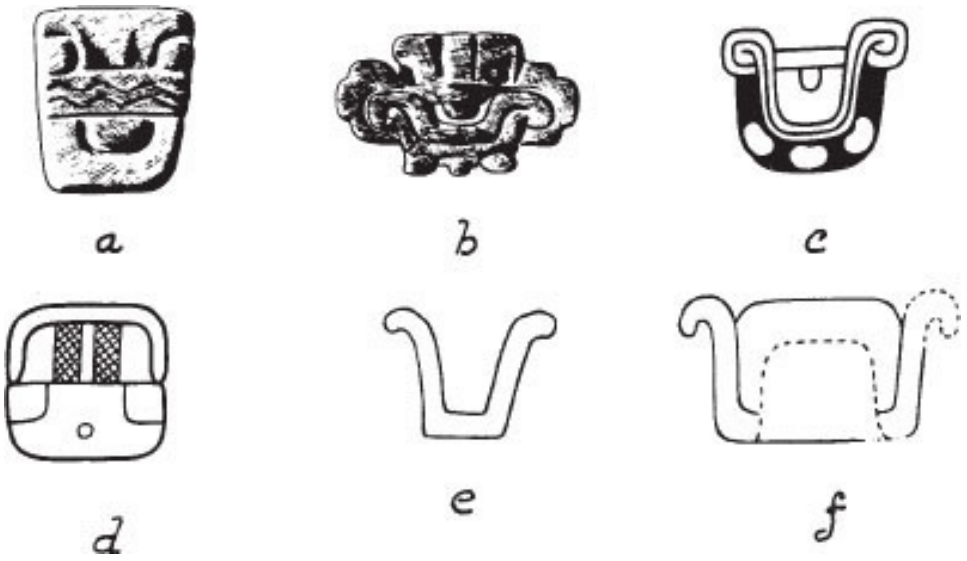
Jade Olmec celt from El Sitio, Guatemala, inscribed with glyphs.

Olmec scribe with glyphs on his chest and hat. Cuilapan, Oaxaca.



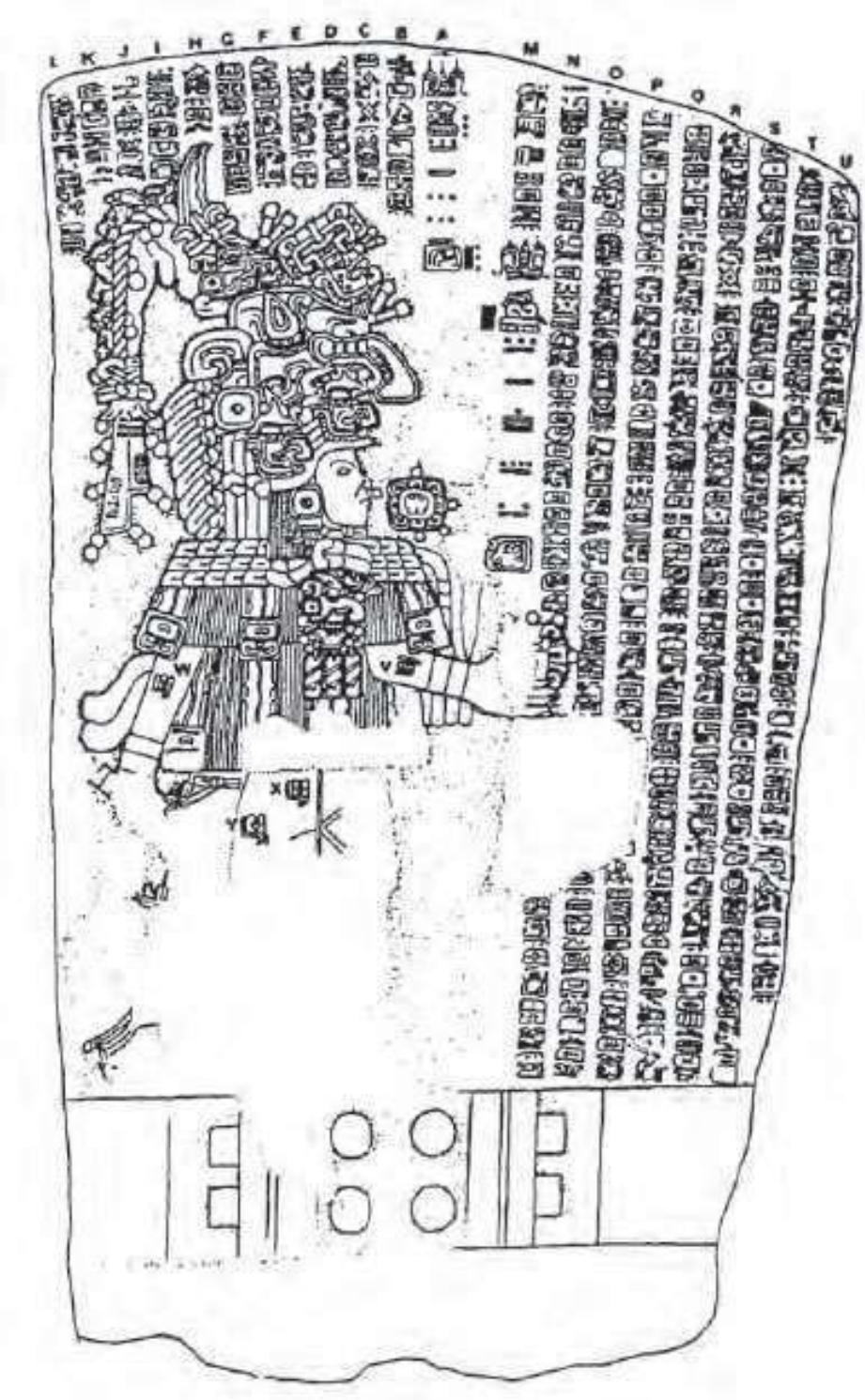
Comacalco bricks with different scripts

Monument Number 13 from La Venta with its early Olmec glyphs.



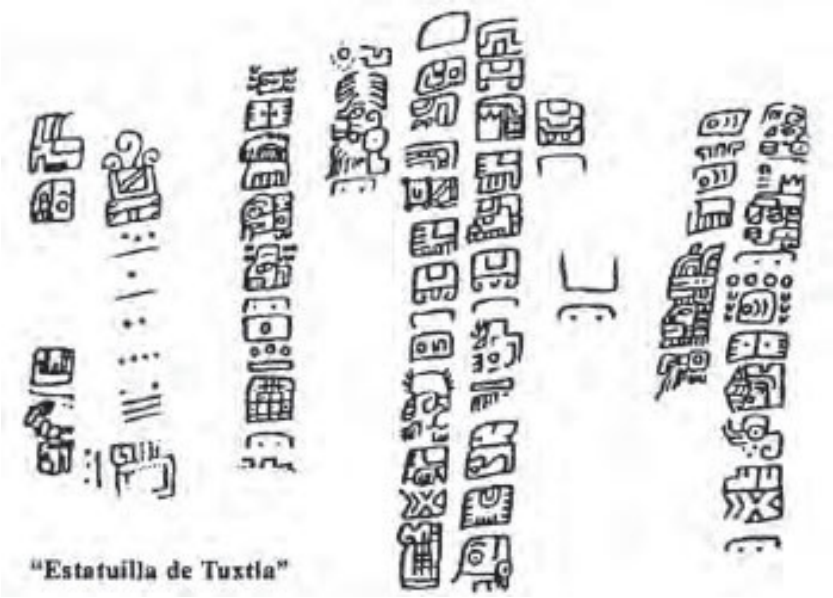
Olmec glyphs identified by Ignacio Bernal.

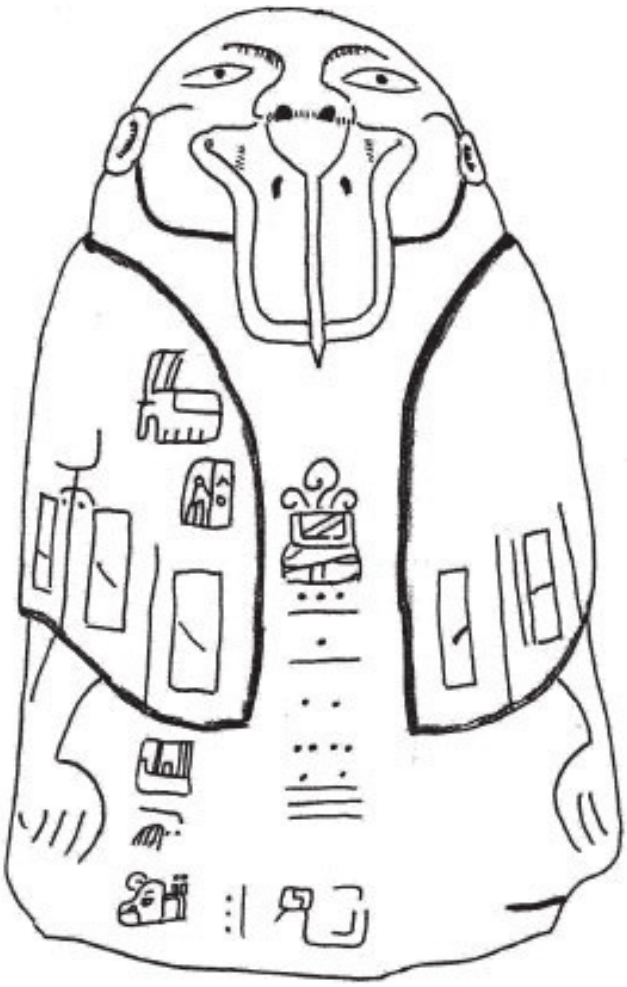
Olmec writing found at Kamalinjuyu, Guatemala.



The famous La Mojarra Stele, found in Veracruz state.

The famous Tuxtla statue, now in the Smithsonian Institution.





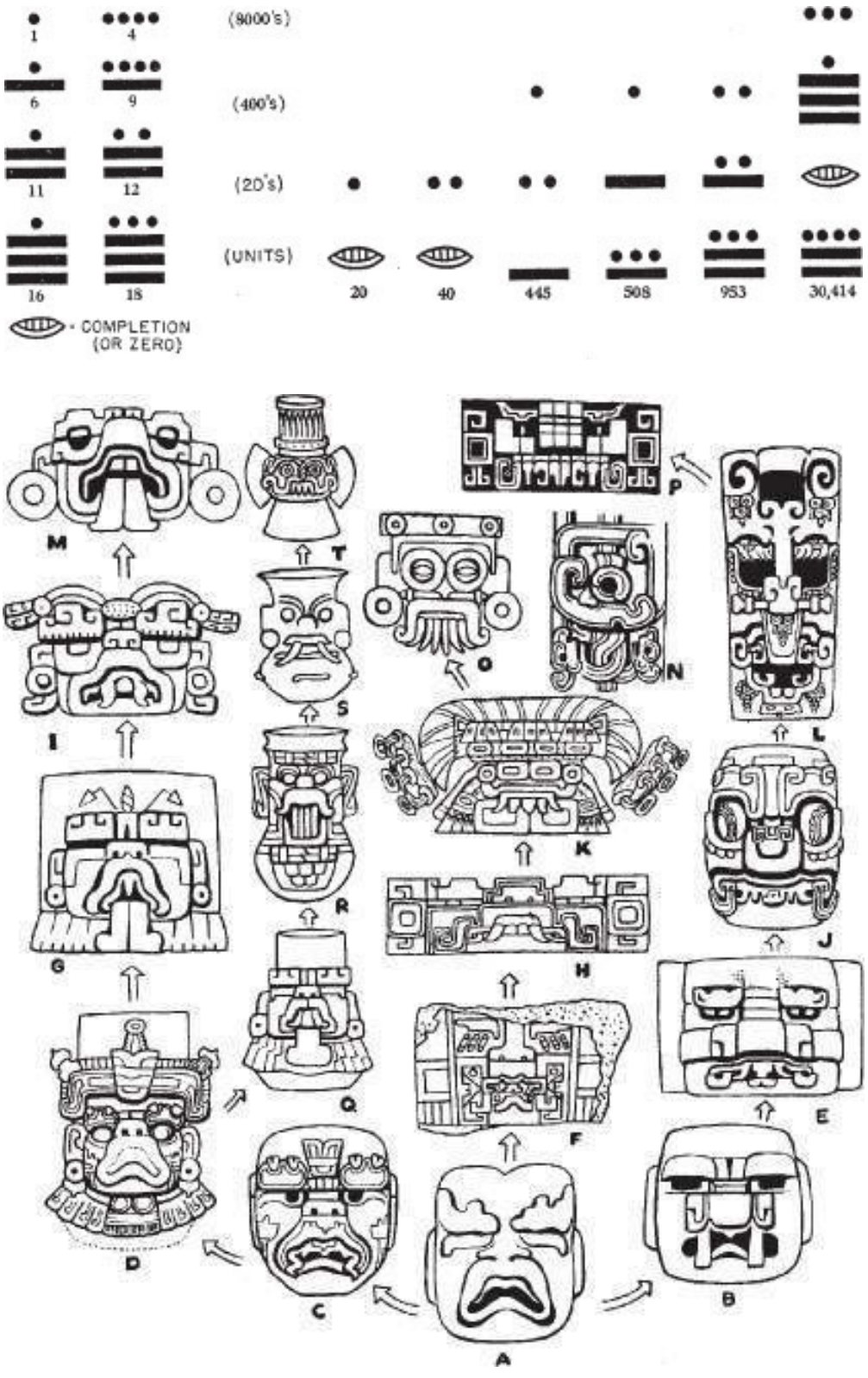
The famous Tuxtla statue and Epi-Olmec glyphs.

Izapan-style pectoral with hieroglyphs.

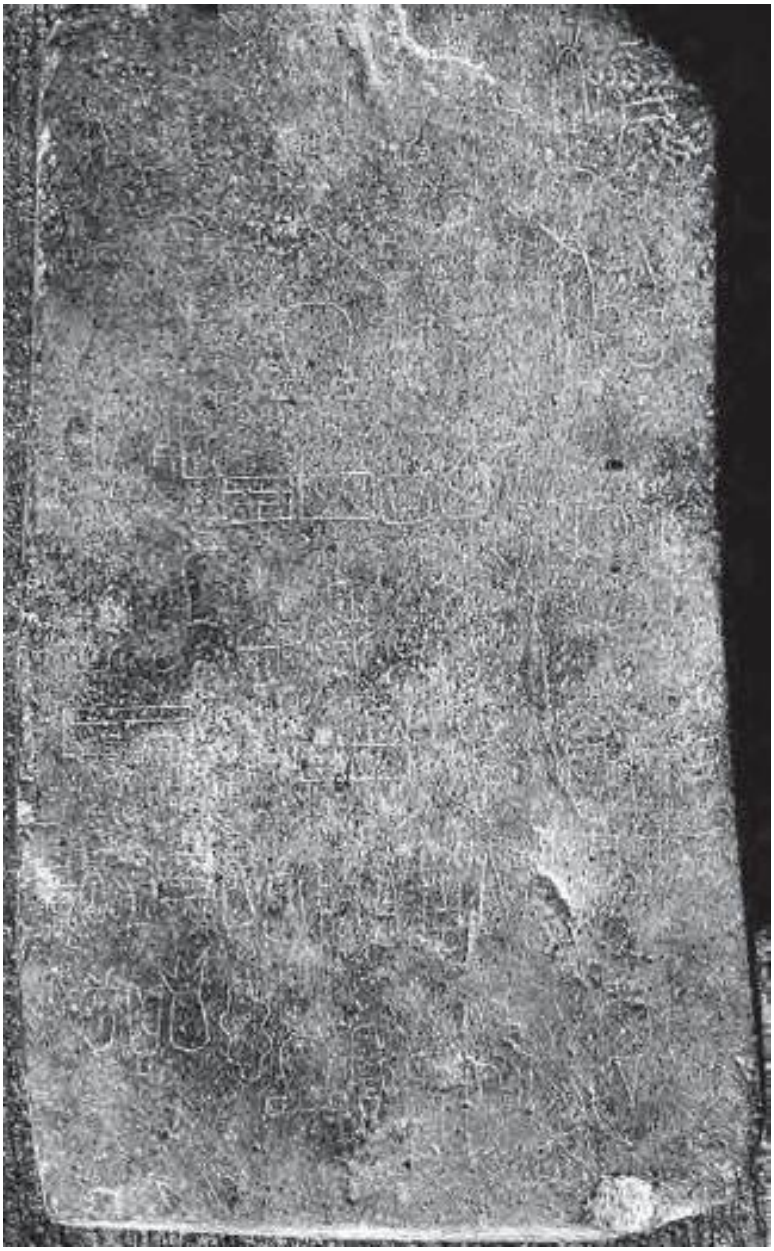
Olmec and Epi-Olmec glyphs.

The Teo Mask with Epi-Olmec glyphs.

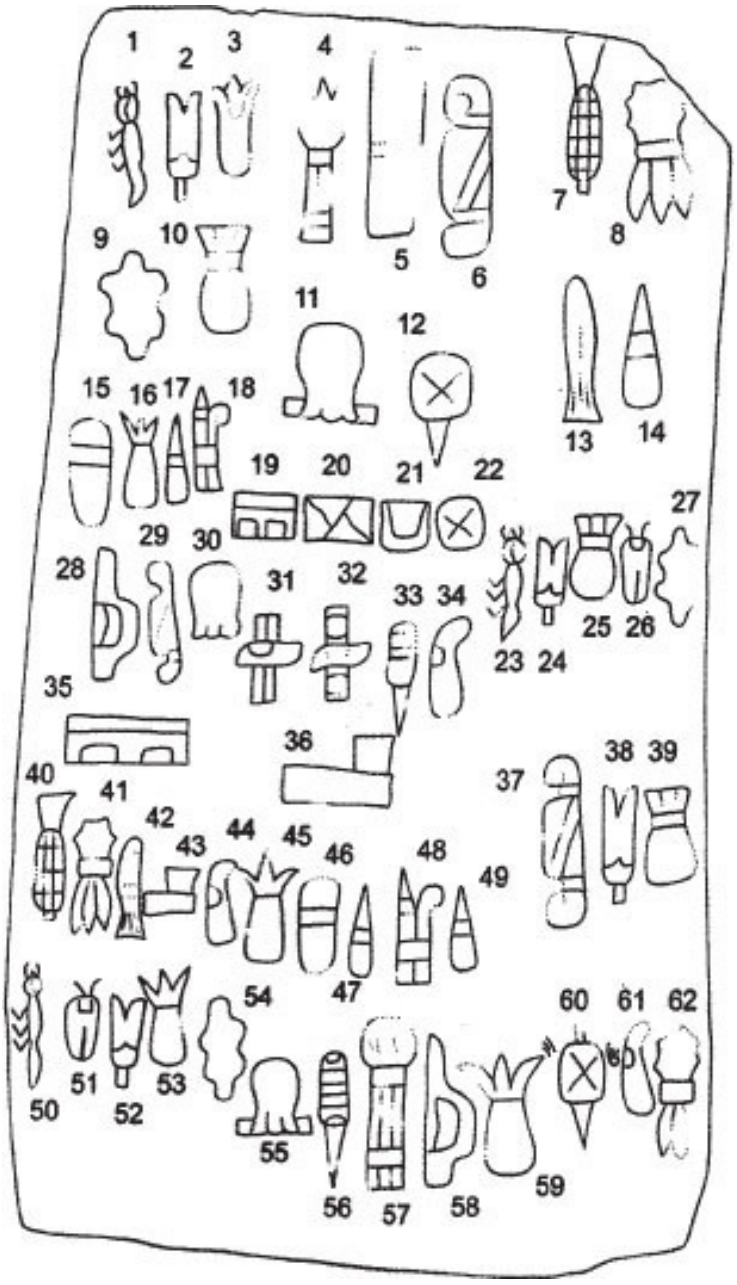
Chalcatzingo vase with glyphs.



Olmec and Epi-Olmec numbers and the Rain God Mask evolution.



The Cascajal Slab.



The Cascajal Slab.

Shang Chinese oracle bone with glyphs.

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7.

THE MYSTERY OF THE OLMECS CONTINUES

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Archeological research is progressing so rapidly that even a generalized account is vulnerable to rapid obsolescence. There is also the problem of erratic information. …When evidence is abundant, it is often contradictory and acceptance or rejection of alternatives depends on the theoretical framework employed.
—Betty J. Meggers, *Prehistoric America (1972)*

The Lost Mines of the Olmecs

Every year new discoveries are made of the Olmecs, proving that they were older and more widespread than ever before guessed. The more we know about the Olmecs, the more we appreciate their genius, their cosmopolitan culture, their amazing art and the sophiscation of the plumbing in their cities, among many other achievements. Great civilizations not only build out of large blocks of stone, have good water and sewage and a thriving trade network, they also need to have metals.

One of the mysteries of Mesoamerica is the enigma of ancient mining. The source of all the jade, emeralds, gold and other metals has not been clearly identified. While South America was well known to have many metal artifacts and ancient mines, the source and quantity of metallic artifacts became a puzzle in North America. Though gold and other metal artifacts were taken as treasure and sent back to Spain in the early Conquest, later, few metallic artifacts were found. Jade mines were virtually non-existent as well, with only one source of jade known to archeologists—the jade mines near Quirigua in Guatemala. Where were the ancient Olmec jade and metal mines? Did the Olmecs even know about metals or have them? Today we know that they did, but early archeologists were skeptical of this.

Rich mineral deposits are to found all over Mexico and Central America. It is known that the Toltecs and Aztecs understood the mining and

smelting of gold and silver, and used the metals for ornaments with which to adorn themselves and to make shields and household utensils.

When the early Spanish explorers came to Peru, Central America, and Mexico, their greed was heightened by the gold, silver and copper adornments that were common among the indigenous peoples.

In the 1940s and 50s the two controversies in Mexican archeology were the Olmecs and the question of how widespread metallurgy was in Mesoamerica. Archeologists had come to the conclusion that only rudimentary gold metalwork was used in ancient times. It was believed that the various cultures did not know how to work metals until about the time of the Aztecs and their empire (1200 AD). Incredibly, sophisticated metalworking techniques were developed in South America as far back as 1200 BC, but such metalwork was not supposedly apparent in Mexico until thousands of years later.

Mexico in 1519, as the archeologist C. A. Burland said, “was where Sumer and Egypt stood in 3500 BC.” In other words, mainstream archeologists say that the cultures of Central America were lagging by thousands of years the progress made by the civilizations in Asia, Europe and Africa. South American cultures such as Tiwanaku (Tiahuanaco) and the later Incas did have sophisticated mining and metalworking endeavors over a thousand years before those of Mexico, but still lacked, supposedly, knowledge of the wheel and writing.

Von Hagen and other mainstream archeologists claim that none of the early Mexican cultures worked metal, and that this ability came up from South America by slow stages through indirect trade. Says von Hagen in his 1958 work *The Aztec: Man and Tribe*, “It does not appear at Teotihuacán, which was already a memory when the technique of gold and copper working reached Mexico. It was unknown to the early Mayas, and the Olmec craftsman contented himself with making diadems of jade. It was not practiced in Mexico much before the eleventh century.”

This assumption that metalworking was non-existent in Mexico until 400 years before the Conquest seems rather curious. It seems likely that metalworking in Mexico, as in the old world and South America, would have been going on for thousands of years.

In a 1995 article in the *Boston Globe* by journalist David L. Chandler entitled “Ancient Mariners: Strong Evidence of Andean-Mexican Seagoing

Trade as Early as 600 AD," the author echoes mainstream thought on the lack of metals in Mexico and says, "Sophisticated and unique metalworking techniques, developed in South America as far as 1200 BC, suddenly appeared in Western Mexico in about 600 AD— without ever being seen anywhere in between. The only reasonable explanation, according to archeologist Dorothy Hosler, is seaborne trade."

Discussing Hosler's work, Chandler says, "Centuries after their development in South America, metal objects appeared suddenly on Mexico's west coast. But the absence of any metal artifacts from that period in all of Central America in between, or in the interior and east coast of Mexico, indicates that these casting methods, alloys and designs could not have been exported via overland trade… Unlike the use of metals elsewhere in the ancient world, where the focus was usually on weapons and agricultural tools, much of the emphasis of both the Mexican and Andean metallurgists was on decorative and ceremonial objects such as bells and jewelry, and small tools such as needles and tweezers."

Chandler goes on to mention how the lost wax process was used in both Colombia and Mexico. Hosler's detailed analysis of the metals from both North and South America showed that, rather than Mexican metals having been transported up from the south, that virtually all the objects found in Mexico were made from native Mexican ores, so what must have come up from the south was metalworking *technology.* In order to have imparted such knowledge, Hosler concluded, the visits must have been much longer and more extensive than would have been needed simply to trade finished goods.

At the end of the article, Chandler quotes Hosler, "One of the aspects that's very interesting for archeologists is that we tend to think these two great civilizations [Mexican and Andean] grew without much influence from one another… This [metal working ability] is fairly unambiguous evidence that there was more extensive interaction than was thought."

So, already there are major cracks in the mainstream archeological dogma that metalworking came late to Mexico. While in 1958 it was thought that metals were not found in Mexico until the 11th century, they are now thought to have been extant by the 7th century AD, still a relatively late date in my opinion. One problem with most metal artifacts is that if they are left exposed to the elements they will corrode and deteriorate. In

the steamy jungle environment that covers much of the area in question, this would happen very quickly. Gold, on the other hand is indestructible, but is often reused and turned into gold bars or hammered into different objects. Cortez was given gold bars by emissaries of Montezuma when he landed at Veracruz from Cuba in 1519.

But is it true that the Mayans and Olmecs did not know metals? Mormon archeologists, seeking proof that the *Book of Mormon* gives an accurate account of Mesoamerican history—including early metalworking—have pointed out that language studies help confirm that metallurgy was indeed used in very ancient Mexico. Mayan and Olmec scholars who were reconstructing parts of several Mesoamerican languages were puzzled to find that a word for "metal" existed as early as 1000 BC, while the language of the Olmecs had a word for metal as early as 1500 BC. (John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 1985, Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City)

More importantly, metals that predate 600 AD have been found in Mesoamerica. A pottery vessel dating to around 300 AD (mentioned by Sorenson) might have been used for smelting. A metallic mass within this vessel contained copper and iron. The archeologist who made this find also found a refined piece of iron in an ancient Mesoamerican tomb.

Much older are the tons of iron that the Olmecs apparently mined. In 1996, a non-Mormon archeologist named Dr. Anne Cyphers asserted that "a total of 10 tons of iron has been found at San Lorenzo, in several massive hoards, the largest of which was four tons. Before the discovery of these hoards, only a few pieces of iron were known. They were discovered by using metal detectors." (William J. Hamblin, "Talk on the Olmecs by Cypher," posted 9/26/96 SAMU-L)

Says Christopher Pool about Olmec metallurgy in his book *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica* (Cambridge University Press, 2007):

> The Olmecs also participated to an unusual degree in the exchange of prestige goods. Literally tons of iron ore in the form of perforated iron cubes and polished mirrors were imported from Chiapas and Oaxaca to San Lorenzo (Agrinnier 1984; Coe and Diehl 1980a; Cyphers and DiCastro 1996; Pires-Ferreira 1976b), and iron ore mirrors later were interred with high-ranking individuals at La Venta (Drucker et al. 1959). Imported jade and serpentine from sources in the Guatemalan and

perhaps Mexican highlands were deposited as offerings in Laguna Manatí before 1500 BC (Ortiz and Rodríguez 2000). The display of such exotic greenstones reached an extravagant level in Middle Formative La Venta, where thousands of tons of serpentine blocks were buried in massive offerings (Drucker et al. 1959).

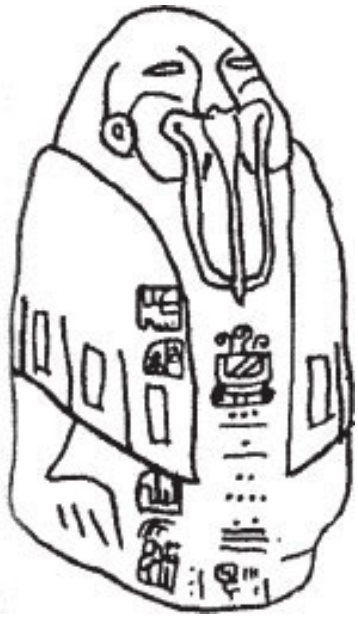
Mining is a sophisticated activity and, like the quarrying, moving and carving of the colossal heads, is indicative of a highly developed culture, one similar to ancient Egypt, India, Sumeria or China. Yet, where did all of this material go? Was some of it exported out of Mesoamerica to other American destinations? Did some of the iron, jade, greenstone and emeralds also make their way back across the oceans?

Olmec Gold—Aztec Gold?

So, the origin and practice of metalworking in Mexico, as we see, is controversial. Like many things in archeology, the use of metals in Mexico is being continually pushed further and further back in time, to a point where metallurgy in Mexico is contemporary with metallurgy in South America. It looks like we can credit the Olmecs with the invention of nearly everything in Mesoamerica, from the ball game, rubber balls and writing to the mining of metals and precious stones.

Gold is basically indestructible. All the gold from Olmec times still exists today. All the gold jewelry from ancient Egypt, China, Mesoamerica and elsewhere still exists today, either melted into gold bars, made into coins, or as artifacts in museums and collections. Jade is largely indestructible as well, being an incredibly hard stone. It can be broken and pulverized, however, leaving us with only pieces of the original work.

What concerns us here, though, is that the later Mesoamerican civilizations such as the Aztecs did indeed have gold, silver, copper and other metals, as well as, presumably, mines. But some of the gold may have come from earlier civilizations such as the Olmecs, and Aztec mines may have originally been Olmec and Epi-Olmec mines.



Von Hagen says that Aztec mining was rudimentary. “Gold was panned or collected in nuggets; silver, which seldom occurs pure in nature, was more of a problem and was less used. Gold is a metal of great ductility, for a single grain can be drawn into a wire five hundred feet long. It was worked by the Aztecs with the simplest of techniques. It was melted in a furnace, heated by charcoal, draft being supplied by a man blowing through a tube into the charcoal embers. There are few implements extant but we have been left illustrations of goldsmithery. They worked the gold by means of hammering, embossing, plating, gilding, sheathing.”

The marketplaces in Mexico typically offered goose quills filled with gold dust. The Conquistador Bernal Diaz saw gold being freely traded in marketplaces: “placed in thin quills of geese, so that the gold could be seen through it.” Goldsmiths had a guild. Those attached to Montezuma’s many-roomed household were nontaxpayers; they were supplied with placer gold and busied themselves making pieces for Montezuma and other officials. Bernal Diaz speaks of the “workers in gold and silver … and of these there were a great number in a town named Atzcapotzalco, a league from Mexico [City].” Since the gold was sold in the market, presumably any craftsman who had enough to barter for goose quills of gold dust could work it up into jewelry for himself or else for trade.

Most of the gold extracted by the conquistadors from Montezuma, some 600,000 pesos weight of it, was melted down into ingots; some of it they thought too beautiful to destroy, like the pieces they received at

Veracruz at the beginning of the adventure. According to Diaz's account, these included: "a wheel like a sun, as big as a cartwheel with many sorts of pictures on it, the whole of fine gold; and a wonderful thing to behold… Then another wheel was presented of greater size made of silver of great brilliancy in imitation of the moon… Then were brought twenty golden ducks, beautifully worked and very natural looking, and some [ornaments] like dogs, and many articles of gold worked in the shape of tigers and lions and monkeys… Twelve arrows and a bow with its string… all in beautiful hollow work of fine gold."

All this was sent intact to Charles VI of Spain. He being then in Flanders, Cortez's ship was sent after him. He was at last found in Brussels, and, on July 12, 1520, Cortez's ambassadors presented the Aztec goldwork to him. His comment, whatever it may have been, was not recorded for posterity. That gold, like all the rest that came from the Americas, went into his crucibles to be made into ingots to pay the soldiery to maintain him on the tenuous throne of the Holy Roman Empire. Fortunately the great artist Albrecht Dürer was there at the time, and he left his impressions of it in his diary. A descendant of a line of Hungarian goldsmiths settled in Nuremberg, Dürer knew what he was seeing. He wrote:

> I saw the things which were brought to the King [Charles VI] from the New Golden Land [Mexico]; a sun entirely of gold, a whole fathom broad; likewise a moon entirely of silver, just as big; likewise sundry curiosities from their weapons, arms and missiles… of all which is fairer to see than marvels…
>
> These things were all so precious that they were valued at 100,000 gulden. But I have never seen in all my days what so rejoiced my heart as these things. For I saw among them amazing artistic objects and I marveled over the subtle ingenuity of the men in these distant lands. Indeed I cannot say enough about the things which were there before me.

That was the only commentary on these works of art by anyone whose opinion meant anything. Charles V ordered that henceforth all gold and silver coming from the Indies be smelted down on arrival. Little survived—except the wonderful descriptions of the early conquistadors. So little gold was later to be found or seen, historians of the 18th century began to believe that the treasures of the Aztecs had been greatly exaggerated by the conquistadors. They believed that, while there might have been some gold

bars and some nicely worked ornaments, it was nothing like what was earlier claimed, the Aztecs simply not having had much gold or other metals for the conquistadors to loot.

This was proved wrong in 1931 when the Mexican archeologist Dr. Alfonso Caso found the undisturbed tomb of a Mexican chieftain at Monte Albán, south of Mexico City, containing superbly beautiful necklaces, earplugs, and rings. Historians realized that the simple, honest Bernal Diaz was making a magnificent understatement and that Montezuma must have had, indeed, a vast store of metallurgical treasures.

What confused archeologists was that the conquistadors had managed to acquire a fortune in gold and jewels from the Aztecs, but shortly afterward, no gold or jewels were to be found in the Aztec lands. So where did all the Aztec gold come from—and where did it go? Is "Montezuma's Treasure" really secreted away somewhere, having been ferried off when the natives realized the conquistador's real motives?

Olmec Mining of Jade, Turquoise, Obsidian and Emeralds

The Olmecs and other Mesoamericans used gold and silver to inlay precious stones. Lapidaries, workers in precious stones, were many, and "skilled workmen Montezuma employed." Foremost of the stones was jade. This was found in southern Mexico (now Guatemala) and valued more highly than gold itself, which Bernal Diaz discovered to his satisfaction. He took four jades during the first Spanish retreat from Tenochtitlán and they "served me well in healing my wounds and gathering me food."

Jade was an article of tribute and the glyph for it is found in the *Aztec Book of Tributes*, a rare codex. It is utterly amazing how the Aztec craftsmen achieved the delicate handling of so hard a stone; it required great patience. Everything of jade was saved, even the smallest pieces of the "precious green," to be put in the mouths of the dead to take the place of the stifled heart.

Jade was the most valuable of all stones to the ancient Chinese, Olmecs, Mayans, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Toltecs and Aztecs. A mystery surrounds the wide use of jade in Mesoamerica, as the material was apparently abundant, yet only one source of jade in Mesoamerica has ever been recognized: the jade mines near Quirigua in Guatemala. Von Hagen says that there is a difference, mineralogically, between the jade of America

and that of the Orient, which should put to rest the idea that the American Indian got his jade from China; it is “American.” Yet, given its abundance, we are still not sure where it all came from. One explanation would be that some jade came from southern Nevada, where jade mines also exist, but historians fail to accept this.

Masks were often made of jade, or, when it was not available, of less valued greenstone. Masks, with their expressionless slit eyes and swollen lips, were a feature among all of the Mesoamerican cultures. Some are exquisite, others are repetitious and “vulgar.” The skill range among the lapidaries was broad; the large objects doubtlessly were done by the “professionals,” yet much was done by the ordinary craftsman. Crystal, a very hard stone, is not easily worked, yet the Aztecs shaped art forms out of it from the smallest of pieces to the life-size crystal skull. The finest example of such a skull, a symbiosis of beauty and death, currently sits before black velvet curtains in the British Museum (when on display).

It is known that turquoise came by trade from the north. It was much in demand and traveled almost as far as the Yucatan. The Aztec exacted turquoise as a form of tribute according to records from eleven towns on the tribute rolls; it was used with other materials for the making of mosaics on masks, knives, and even walls.

One of the reasons the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican tribes didn’t use metals for spearheads and swords as in the Old World was because of the high quality obsidian to be obtained near Lake Texcoco. Sharper than any metal, obsidian glass was a Mesoamerican specialty; it was exported as raw material and as finished product. Found close by, a product of volcanic action, obsidian was used for knives, razors, lip Plugs, mirrors of high polish, and other objects of immense beauty.

According to von Hagen, emeralds (quetzal-itzli) were the prize gemstone for the Aztec as well as for the Spanish. José de Acosta, an early visitor to the New World wrote, “The Kings of Mexico didde much esteeme theme; some did use to pierce their nostrils and hang them therein, on the vissages of their idolles.” As soon as Montezuma was elected as Chief Speaker, the first thing he did was “to pierce the gristle of his nostrils, hanging thereat a rich emerald.”

Says von Hagen:

> The conquistadors saw them as a symbol of riches. Hernán Cortez commandeered the whole of them for himself; he knew that Cleopatra wore emeralds and that a Christian pilgrim lately from India saw them in a temple of Buddha, “flashing their fire two hundred leagues on a cloudless night.”
>
> Asforthesource,Montezumaexpressedignorance; they were from “the south.” In fact, they were from only one region, the mountain areas in Colombia, about Muzo, which was the only source of emeralds at that time. They were plenteous in Colombia, where they were used for barter to obtain cotton and gold dust. They were well known in Panama and used to great effect in combination with gold. They were obtained for Montezuma by the activities of his pochteca merchants who penetrated beyond Nicaragua. Emeralds are soft and chip easily, yet the Aztecs cut them in intricate patterns—flowers, fish, fanciful forms of exquisite workmanship. Hernán Cortez got his emeralds directly from Montezuma, one in a pyramidal shape, “broad as the base of the hand,” others so fabulous that Charles V is said to have coveted the fantastic baubles. Cortez refused 400,000 ducats in Genoa for them, saving them for Doña Juana de Zuniga, his betrothed, a daughter of a ducal family. He gave her five Aztec-worked emeralds, “one in the form of rose, one like a bell with a pearl for a tongue, one like a fish, one like a trumpet, one like a cup.

So we see that the Aztecs were themselves the center of a vast trading network of jewels and valuable metals. Emeralds came to them from South America (no source has been found in Central America, yet). Turquoise came from the American Southwest. Jade came from southern Guatemala and perhaps Nevada.

Gold and silver apparently came from many areas in Mesoamerica, including mines in the American Southwest and northern Mexico. It seems that, for such an extraordinary trade network to exist, there must have been underpinnings. Pool’s 2007 work seems to indicate that the Olmecs laid the groundwork for this trade, and probably participated in it. Many of the Aztec, Toltec, Mayan and Zapotec mines may have originally been Olmec mines, and many of these are still lost to us today. The source of all the gold, jade, and emeralds known to have been traded remains something of a mystery today. Are there still lost or secret mines of the Olmecs in the ancient land called Olman?

The Lost World of the Olmecs in Guatemala

Early maps of Olmec settlements, such as Betty Meggers' 1972 map in her book *Prehistoric America*, show an Olmec Heartland or "Core Area" around La Venta and Tres Zapotes. But Olmec artifacts are found in the Central Valley of Mexico and these are called by her the "Teotihuacan Style," while the Olmec artifacts found along the Pacific coast of Chiapas and Guatemala are called "Izapan Style."

It is now known that the Land of Olman spread from the Central Valley to the La Venta area and to the Pacific coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and even further south along the Pacific into Guatemala to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Indeed, the mysterious round balls of Costa Rica may well be from the early Olmec era.

While we have found small statuettes of Olmec figures in Costa Rica, it is in Guatemala that the largest statues and stone heads are to be found. Some of these rival the colossal heads found on the Gulf Coast in sheer size and skill of workmanship.

Says Christopher Pool about monumental Olmec statues in his book *Olmec Archaeology and Early Mesoamerica:*

> Among the Early and Middle Formative cultures of Mesoamerica, the Olmecs of the Gulf Coast are exceptional in several respects. Their most obvious accomplishments were in monumental stone sculpture. Although stone sculptures appear at least as early on the Pacific slope of Guatemala, at sites such as Takalik Abaj and Monte Alto, no other contemporaneous culture matches the Olmecs for the sophistication, size, and number of their stone monuments. Indeed, it is precisely the concentration of Olmec-style monuments in southern Veracruz and Tabasco that most clearly distinguishes Olman as a cultural region (Grove 1997: 51-53). Although Olmec sculptors expressed several themes, and sculptural styles do vary in time and space throughout Olman, consistencies in representation, subject, and symbolic expression define a coherent Olmec sculptural tradition spanning the period from 1400 to 400 B.C. These include a focus on humans and composite supernatural beings depicted with harmonious flowing lines and swelling volumes and a standard set of symbols representing cosmological concepts and natural forces.

Archeologists originally considered statues found in Guatemala as being inferior to the Olmec, and to attribute them to a culture other than the Olmec. But this would prove to be wrong. In a similar manner to the farmers who discovered the buried heads found around La Venta and Tres Zapotes in Mexico, sugar cane farmers tilling land south of Guatemala City, Guatelmala, near the town of La Democracia began discovering giant heads and basalt statues that were clearly Olmec. In the main square of La Democracia are gigantic Olmec statues situated in a ring around the plaza. Typical of the most famous Olmec statuary, these gigantic basalt heads and full-bodied figures are often Negroid in appearance. Quite a number of them depict large, fat men with wide noses, thick lips, and goggle eyes with their arms wrapped around their stomachs. Other specimens are bizarre Asian-type heads; one has a headdress of ram horns curling down, and strange signs on his cheeks.

Inside the local museum are more giant heads, these with large patches of lichen on them. There are carved mushroom stones that measure one to one-and-a-half feet tall. Archeologists believe that these probably depict the psychedelic mushrooms that were highly valued. Notably, it is thought that the divine “Soma” of the ancient near East and India was a fermented psychedelic mushroom drink, possibly originating in Central America.

Also in the museum are solar discs in stone, a jade mask (probably the museum’s most important piece) some very large stone pots and stone maces. Perhaps the most interesting items of all in the museum are quite tiny. Displayed in a glass case near the door are a number of stone seals about two inches high. Having lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China back in the mid-1970s, I am quite familiar with Chinese seals, and have several of them myself. The owner’s name carved in an artistic motif into the base, and it is used with lacquer or ink to authenticate documents, letters, etc. In China they are called “chops.” What these Izapan Style Olmec versions are called, we have no idea, yet they are obviously seals.

Near La Democracia is a large sugar cane plantation with a private museum known as *Finca el Baul.* In this museum are at least twenty or thirty megalithic figures that are also Olmec. They depict bearded men and monsters, dragons and jaguar-men. Other pieces of stone are rectangular ornamental blocks or smaller skulls with wide eyes and toothy grins. There is a huge ancient stele, with a large glyph said to be the ancient Mayan

glyph for jade; it is the only recognizable glyph, except for some Mayan-Olmec numerals of dots and dashes.

Also at the farm's small museum is a large stele of a man in a jaguar mask. It is eight-and-a-half feet high with an Egyptianlike collar (I am referring to a collar that is wide, and was typically made out of gold or copper plates; the Mayas wore similar collars). He is shown conquering a bearded prisoner, and there are three round glyphs in the upper portion of the stele. One of the glyphs is of a man coming out of a cloud in the upper left corner. At the bottom of the stele are six cross-legged men with their arms folded across their chests.

Another statue is a massive stone head, three feet high, depicting a bearded man with an Egyptian-type headdress and collar. Another large statue represents a huge, five-foot-tall, solid granite jaguar sitting up like a dog begging. It too has a large, Egyptian-like wide collar around its neck. It has fangs and its tongue is sticking out. Perhaps the most curious of all was a rectangular stone pillar about three feet high with a perfectly round ball on top. The whole thing is carved out of a solid piece of granite and two Maltese crosses are carved into each side.

All of these things had been found just lying around in the fields by workers when they began clearing them for sugar cane planting. Near the farm, up several dirt roads on a small, little-used track through the sugar

cane fields is the Giant Head of El Baul. It is a massive, eight-ton head, Partially buried, with a hook-nose, headdress, ear-rings and big eyes.

When I visited this site, known as El Castillo (“The Castle”), in 1990, two men were worshiping the ancient statue. They were burning incense, a traditional Mayan (also Hindu) custom, and lit five candles around the base of the statue where they had made offerings of food, liquor and jade.

The statue is made out of extremely hard basalt and was covered with soot and wax from previous offerings of candles and incense. From the lower lip it is still buried in the earth, and the portion above ground stands five feet high. Behind it are grooves that were seemingly meant to attach it to a building or some other stone structure, perhaps a massive body.

A second megalith is nearby, a six-foot stele entirely above ground and beneath a tree. On it is carved a man with a headdress, clean shaven, who stands facing to the right. Around his head are nine circles. There were six circles on the left and three on the right. The third circle on the right depicts an animal, with a collar on it, facing the man. It looks like a bull, though cattle were unknown in the Americas at that time.

The man in the stele is wearing a skirt or kilt (like the ancient Egyptians wore) and there was another circle on the skirt which had a ram inside it.

Looking around on that visit, I realized that, just as had to be the case with the gigantic statues at La Democracia, there had to be more. Where were the buildings that had once housed these statues? Most of this stuff was buried or half buried. The gigantic statues at the *Finca* had just been lying around in fields, also buried, when discovered. It seemed obvious to me that at one point this whole Pacific area of Guatemala had been a thriving, sophisticated, megalithic culture. As I am wont to ask, “Where are the lost cities?”

I believe that archeological investigations of El Castillo, if excavated, would no doubt reveal more structures. Indeed, there were a number of large, squared blocks lying around that appeared to part of whatever the structure was that had once contained the statues.

Many of the massive statues found in the park in La Democracia came from the nearby pyramid site named Monte Alto. The Olmec site of Kaminaljuyu is still hundreds of kilometers to the west. But were they

related? The varied racial nature of the different statues, everything from Negroid heads, Asiatic types and bearded Mediterraneans seem to be in evidence here, as at other Olmec sites.

Was there a cataclysmic change that wiped out this bizarre and fascinating civilization? Could it have been the same alleged cataclysm of the Bible, Sumerian texts, Hopi and Chinese legends? It seems plausible to me.

The Olmecs Continue to Be in the News

As recently as January of 2007 it was announced that a major new Olmec or Olmec-influenced city had been discovered in the Valley of Mexico, in an area just south of Mexico City. Articles written about the discovery expressed surprise that a new Olmec city was not on the Gulf Coast but hundreds of miles inland.

On January 26, 2007, a number of news agencies ran the story of the new city, known as Zazacatla, being announced as "officially discovered" by Mexican archeologist Giselle Canto located near the town of Xochitepec, which is about 25 miles south of Mexico City.

In the news conference Canto said that two statues and architectural details at the site indicated that the inhabitants of Zazacatla had adopted Olmec styles when they "changed from a simple, egalitarian society to a more complex, hierarchical one."

Said Canto, "When their society became stratified, the new rulers needed emblems… to justify their rule over people who used to be their equals." Canto said of inhabitants may not have been ethnically Olmec, but apparently revered the culture as the most prestigious.

The excavation of Zazacatla began in 2006 and by the end of January, 2007 archaeologists had unearthed six buildings, and two sculptures of what appear to be Olmec-style priests. Among other Olmec symbols, the sculptures appear to have headdresses portraying the jaguar, which the Olmecs revered, plus other Olmec symbols of status and authority. Archeologists estimated the age of the city at about 2500 years old, putting it at circa 500 BC.

Some Mexican archeologists, as well as archeologists at the Smithsonian Institution, had speculated that the signs of Olmec influence found at Zazacatla and other areas far from the Gulf coast might suggest

Olmec settlements, conquests or missionary sites. But Canto said in her announcement that the Olmecs' most famous ceremonial center (La Venta), about 250 miles east, was too far for direct contact, though trade links may have existed.

It would seem that Canto would be wrong in her pronouncement of Zazacatla, or any area, being too far away to be in direct contact with a centralized Olmec culture. It is this kind of absurd statement made by an "expert" that makes one want to cringe. Why shouldn't the Olmecs have been able to have had direct contact with cities 250 miles away from their center? The Mayans and Aztecs had even larger areas as part of their territory, and, naturally, built elegant road systems between them. The Aztecs had a trade network that went hundreds of miles to the north, nearly to the American Southwest. With new archeological discoveries happening all the time, we would not be surprising to find that the Olmecs also laid the ground for these roadways.

While the Romans, Chinese, Persians, Incas and others built hundreds of miles of sophisticated roads, including bridges and tunnels, the Olmecs were apparently unable to do this, says Canto. Who is giving a "racist" argument? Is it a racist theory that says that civilizations in Europe, Africa and Asia could build good road systems, but the Olmecs could not?

That the "new" Olmec city of Zazacatla, near the already known Olmec city of Chalcatzingo, would be discovered does not really seem so surprising. What is surprising is that archeologists are surprised. Why would this be?

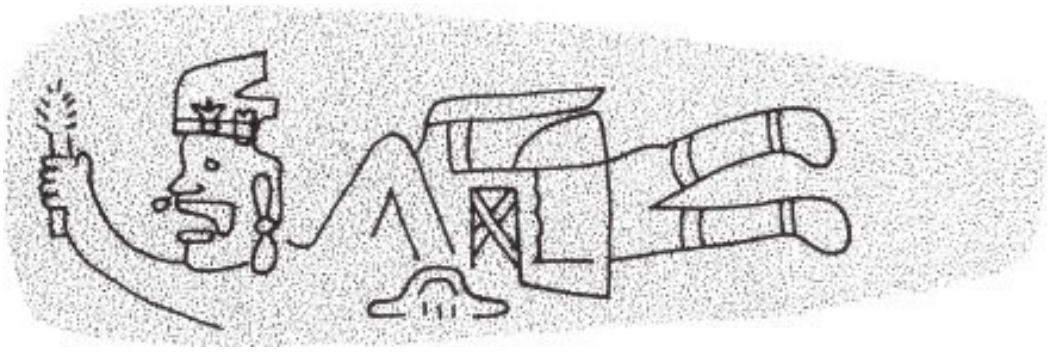
Perhaps it is because many archeologists, such as Coe and Diehl, are telling us the Olmecs were a small, isolated group who were not widespread. Yet, somehow, inexplicably, their art and iconography were popular and spread in all directions from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and their so-called "Core Area" of La Venta and Tres Zapotes.

Is it possible that areas of the Pacific Coast, like those around Izapa in Chiapas and the Pacific Coast area of Guatemala are where the Olmecs truly originated? Areas of Guatemala show signs of having been hit by a tsunami from the Pacific Ocean that may have instantly wiped out cities in the area and buried many of the stone heads and statues. Was the original capital of the Olmecs a now-destroyed city along the coast of Chiapas or Guatemala?

Perhaps the Olmec centers along the Pacific coast were wiped out in a tsunami circa 1000 BC. The Olmec centers at La Venta and Tres Zapotes then became the most important Olmec cities, but declined 500 years later. Other Olmec centers were formed in the Valley of Mexico like Chalcatzingo, Cuicuilco, Teotihuacan and Zazacatla.

The mystery of the Olmecs, it seems, will not be solved in a day, or a week, or even in the next few years. It appears to be a mystery that will endure for quite some time to come. Perhaps more Chinese scholars will be invited to examine the early Olmec glyphs, shedding more light on them. Perhaps exciting new discoveries still to come will completely change our current views of the Olmecs. It is an exciting period in archeology, at least in terms of new understanding of the Olmecs, and by extension, the roots of North American civilization. As noted in the quote at the beginning of this chapter (from Betty Meggers) interpretation of evidence is tempered by the framework by which it is reviewed. History isn't always politically correct, but truth and what happened in the distant past should be outside of politically correct agendas and feel-good policies.

So, hopefully, in the future scholars and laymen alike will look at the amazing art and culture of the cosmopolitan civilization of the Olmecs with an open mind and a deeper appreciation of history's many mysteries.



Olmec statue from El Baul, Guatemala.

Relief from Chalcatzingo. Does it depict the Aztec (and apparently Olmec) version of the destruction of the First World, *Naui-Ocelotl*, “Four Jaguar,” when tradition has it that men were devoured by jaguars?

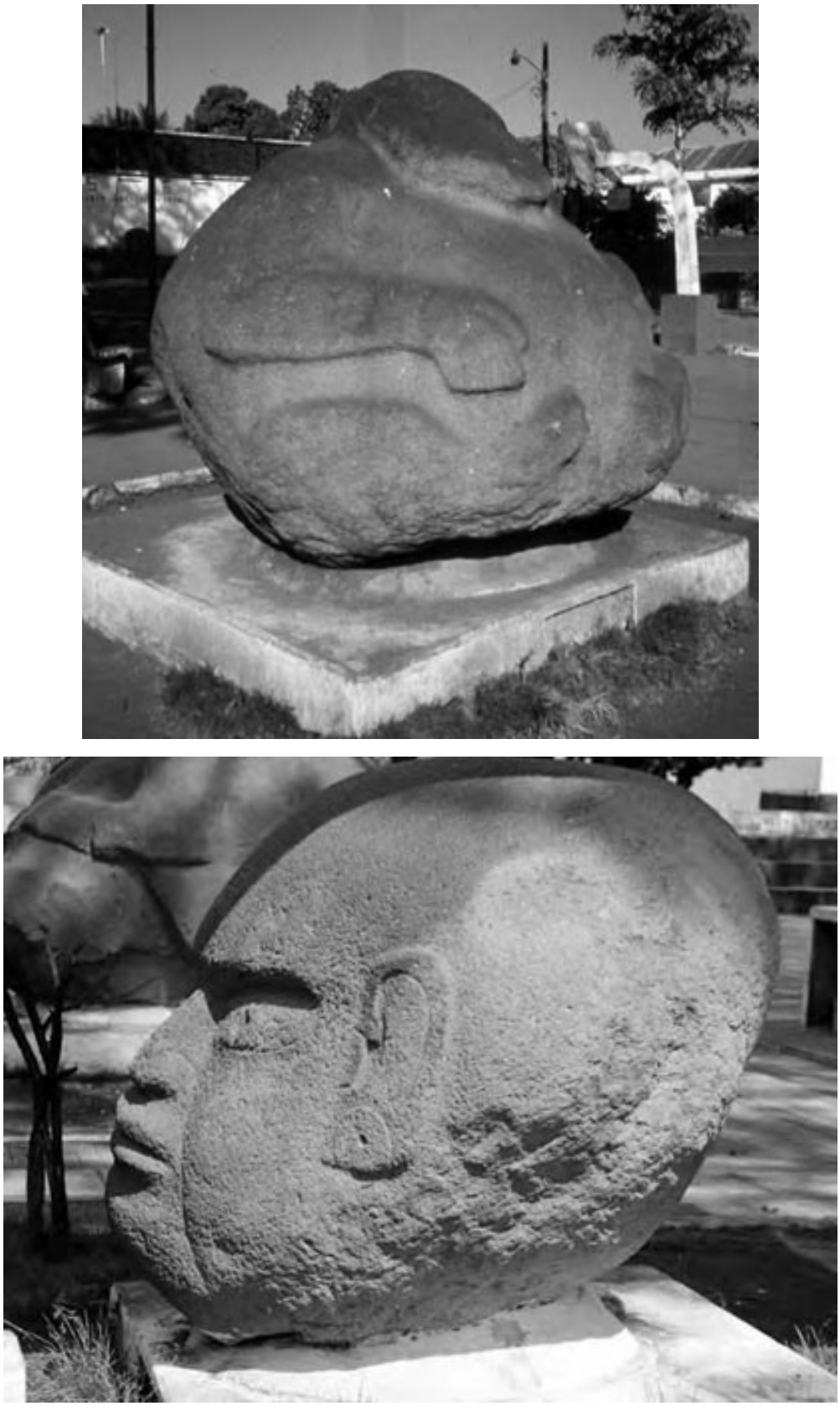
Olmec figurines have been found as far south as Costa Rica and Panama. Top: Olmec figure from Nicaragua in quizuo position. Below: Jade figurine of an Olmec birdman from Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

Olmec statue from El Baul, Guatemala.

Olmec statue from El Baul, Guatemala.

Olmec statue from El Baul, Guatemala.

Statue from the Cauca Valley, Colombia.



Olmec statues from El Baul, Guatemala.

Olmec statue from El Baul, Guatemala.

Olmec statue from El Baul, Guatemala.

Top: Xalapa figurine. Bottom: Olmec puppetman from El Baul, Guatemala.

Olmec were-jaguar sculpture from Teopantecuanitlan, Guerrero, Mexico.

Figurine from Ojo de Agua, Chiapas.

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Early color photo of the colossal head discovered at La Venta, late 1940s.

Left: Colossal head from I Très Zapotes, now in the town square of Tuxtla.

Early excavations at La Venta uncovered sophisticated water systems.

Right: Mushroom stones and other Olmec artifacts from the museum in La Democracia, Guatemala. Psychodelic mushrooms were a major trade item in Olman and highly prized.

Right: Monument 1 from San Lorenzo, now at the Xalapa Museum. Below: Olmec figurines at the museum at Comacalco.

Above: Colossal Head 4 discovered at San Lorenzo, once at the Smithsonian, now at the Anthropological Museum in Xalapa. Right: Colossal head from La Venta, now at the Archeological Park in Villahermosa.

Above and Left:The famous jade statuette and celt Offering Number 4 found at La Venta, now at the National Anthropological Museum in Mexico City. It I must be concluded that the Olmecs look like this, with deformed and elongated heads. These jade celts were examined by Chinese scholars to see if they contained Shang Chinese script.

Above: Greenstone statue of an Olmec holding a were-jaguar baby. Found at Las Limas, Veracruz and known as the “Lord of Las Limas,” dated to circa 1200 BC. Left: Cave painting at Oxtotitlan, Guerrero depicting an Olmec wearing a jade mask and a jade penis (?) while standing next to a stylized jaguar. Perhaps Olmec eunuchs wore a ceremonial jade penis and mask in some of their magical were-jaguar rites.

Above: Ceramic at Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology of an Olmec ball player in a playful mood with a rubber ball. The Olmecs are credited with originating the popular game known throughout Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. Right: Olmec statue known as part of "The Twins," from Azuzul,Veracruz. Note the unusual Egyptian-type headdress and curious box on his forehead, similar to Hebrew-Phoenican customs, in which the box held magical writing or parts of the Torah.

The circular pyramid of Cuicuilco, built by the Olmecs, near Mexico City

Olmec jade celts (adzes) at the National Museum in Mexico City.

Colossal head discovered at San Lorenzo, now at the Xalapa Anthropological Museum.

Two Olmec figurines with the “Happy Chinaman” look. Perhaps they, like many Olmecs, were ingesting “magic mushrooms.”

Above: “The Wrestler” or “The Rower” from Antonio Plaza, Veracruz. Right: I Olmec jade piece. Both are currently at the National Anthropological Museum in Mexico City.

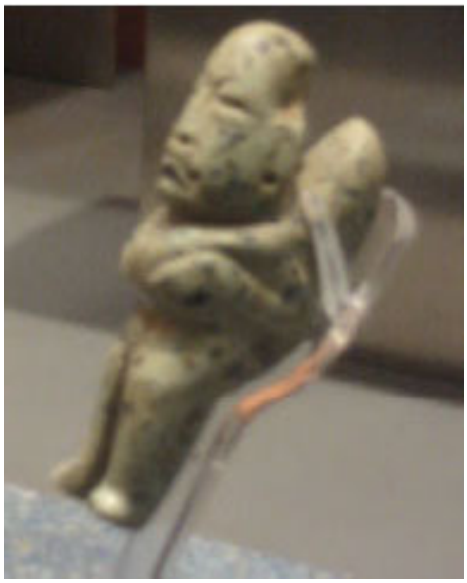
Right: Olmec figurines on display in the National Museum, Mexico City. Bottom: Olmec were-jaguar statue from San Lorenzo, now at the Xalapa Anthropological Museum.

Olmec figurines, including “eunuchs” at National Museum in Mexico City.

Right: Olmec statue with mohawk haircut at the _ Archeological Park in ‘ Villahermosa, Tabasco.

Olmec statues in the plaza of La Democracia, Guatemala.

Olmec basalt mask in the National Museum, Mexico City.



Above Left: Olmec hunchback from Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz now in the National Museum, Mexico City. Above Right: Olmec hunchback at the National Museum of Costa Rica, San Jose. Bottom:Olmec “Sci-Fi” head now in the Anthropological Museum in Xalapa.

Above: Olmec hunchback at the National Museum of Costa Rica, San Jose. Below, left: Olmec hunchback from Cerro de las Mesas, Veracruz now in the National Museum, Mexico City. Bottom Right: Jade Olmec Birdman figurine from Guanacaste, Costa Rica.

Right: Jade Olmec Birdman figurine from Guanacaste, Costa Rica. Below: Olmec stele at El Baul in Guatemala with hieroglyphs, masked men, a rubber ball and more.

Elongated Olmec skulls on display at Mexico City’s National Archeological Musem.

Elongated crania on display at the lea Museum in Peru.

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